TEN COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

FAMOUS WESTERN

OCT. 15¢ ANC.

SATAN RIDES THE SKY
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by Edward Churchill

WOMAN CALLED DAGGER
by John Jo Carpenter

SAFE IN BOOTHILL
by William O'Sullivan

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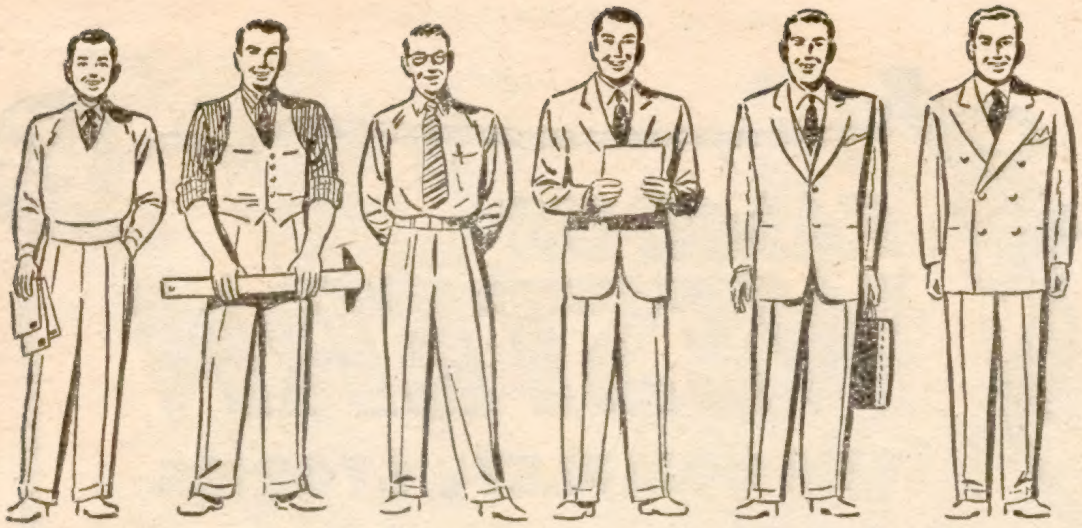

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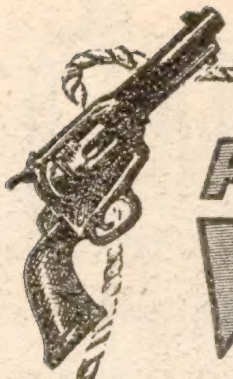

FAMOUS WESTERN

TEN COMPLETE STORIES

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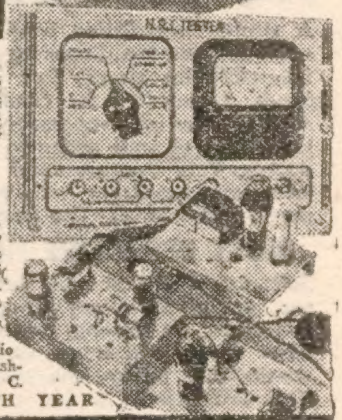

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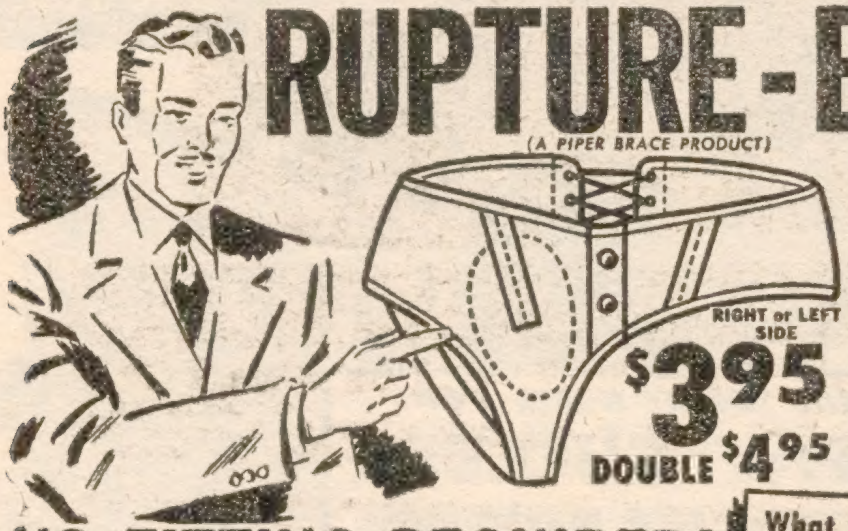

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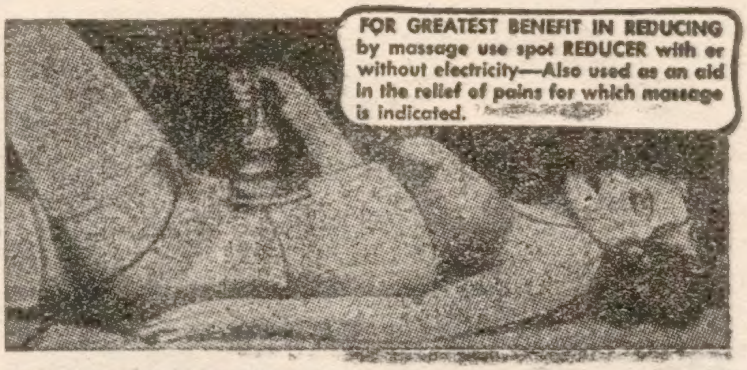

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For a moment, Claiborne was back with Morgan's raiders . . .

SATAN RIDES ★ ★ ★ the SKY

FAST MOVING FEATURE NOVEL

by Edward Churchill

"You can't go through with this race, Claiborne. The whole town is betting, and too many fools are staking their entire holdings on it. There's dirty work afoot behind the scenes." But Branch Claiborne couldn't withdraw, now, for withdrawal would mean losing, and the town was betting on his horse to win!

BRANCH CLAIBORNE felt the sticky pressure of damp heat on his back, shifted his lank, taut body in his saddle, lifted slate-blue eyes to the cloud-pillared eastern sky. He watched blackness funneling upward from the prairie, sweeping up and outward, purple and boiling with anger, felt the challenge of the approaching storm against his own fierce mood.

The graceful-limbed, dark-haired girl on the horse beside him turned in her saddle, her small, brown hand sending her impatience down to the bit, lifting the fine head of the mare she rode, jarring her to a halt. "We'll settle it here and now," she snapped. "You're going to sell Chico before he ruins you."

Claiborne looked into the anger of his companion, drawled with deceptive softness, "Devil's ridin' the sky ahead of us. Seems like everything's bustin' loose at once."

Deliberately he gazed down at his mount, Chico, a beautiful sorrel gelding with one white stocking leg

—heavy and long of muscle, with power alive in a great chest.

With the same deliberation, the southerner dallied his reins around his pommel, flipped a sack from his shirt pocket, fingered brown paper, poured tobacco and cemented the cylinder with his tongue.

At the same time he slanted his glance over the sinuous, wrath-tightened body, looked up to catch the fireglint in her eyes. Easily, he caught the figurative gauntlet she had tossed him. *Her ultimatum,* he thought, *is that I pick her or my horse. It isn't so much the horse as what I do with him. My life's uncertain, and I can't blame her for wanting certainty.*

"You've brought me a long ways, Barbara," he said, shielding a match's quick flame, taking a long draw, and breaking the match. "You've saddled a fiddlefoot, taught him to ground-hitch when you drop the reins. You've hog-tied him to a livery stable. But, sometimes, even a beauty with a will that came out of a blacksmith's forge can go a mite too far—"

As the accusaton lazed resentfully from his lips, he looked back over his shoulder at the town of Silver Bluff, flat and squalid against the plain behind them, raw with new birth—his prison, now, for over a year. The brassy afternoon sun, still free of the marching clouds, slanted steaming rays onto hasty improvisations of board and batten, clapboard, canvas, and a splash of paint.

"You'll sell Chico!" The girl's insistence pressed on him. "He lost that last race and now you've mortgaged your stable in the foolish gesture of racing him against any and all comers day after tomorrow—"

"Chico threw a shoe," Claiborne said, patting the silken coat on the animal's finely arched neck; "don't forget he won the money for the stable and my homestead on the north range."

As he mentioned the quarter-section he looked along the plain cut by the Indigo, a thin silver ribbon, green-edged, tracing down from the rangelands to the north, away from the near fields of homesteaders' grain. His eyes sought solace beyond the shadowy plateau in the great mountains, half gold and half green in the sun's splash. He watched gold and green retreat from the storm's gray.

"A quarter-section with no water on it," Barbara scoffed.

"Soon I'll have water, a thousand head of cattle, my horses and a home out where a man can really live—"

"Dreams, Branch!" Barbara's hazel eyes picked up the gray of the smouldering clouds. "You've got to get some sense. You're betting everything you have in the world; if Chico loses another shoe, breaks a leg, meets a faster horse or—"

She paused to let tight anxiety escape her lungs, then: "You've thrown in with the gaming element, the drunks, the hangers-on, the wasters. Why can't you be like Clint Hargreaves, running a bank, minding your affairs properly, making your money honestly?"

"Why throw that carpetbagger in my face again?" The easy Arkansas drawl was gone from his voice now, and anger sharpened his words. "That two-faced skinflint, hidin' behind the glass front of repute. Guess you don't know it was him that dared me to match Chico against all-comers—"

"Why d o n ' t you like him, Branch?"

"Why don't a cowhorse like a rattler, Barbara? They're mortal enemies. They don't—they can't—live in the same world. One has to go—"

"Jealous."

The word stung him to increasing wrath. "I'm jealous of no man. We were talkin' about Chico—"

CLAIBORNE'S alert eyes, sharp over the wheat beyond the barbed wire, saw the figure swing his horse from the shallow trail onto this road between Silver Bluff and Sabre City, a trail town forty miles east. His eyes sparked and narrowed as he saw the tall, rugged body, topped by stiff, broad-brimmed hat, the long coat, carefully pressed trousers, cylindrical over-polished boots.

"Devil's ridin' the fields, too," he said.

He resented the interest, the excitement in Barbara's voice as she hailed the immaculate rider. "Hi, Clint Hargreaves!"

Branch set a wall against his wrath as he watched Hargreaves approach along the narrow road, felt the inadequacy of battered hat, weather-bleached shirt, levis and cracked boots against silk, linen and finely woven and cut woolen. The difference in their ways of life—banker and stableman—made him resent the shortcomings of his occupation. Here was the flat impact of two ways of life.

He sensed the shortness of the end he held against a money-lender who talked of homesteaders building a city; of a railroad soon to extend itself west from Sabre City to Silver Bluff; at the champagne and chandelier future of the rough, unfinished town at this moment pressing tight to earth with childish wondering of the sky's wild threat.

He wanted to lash out at the smugness of a man from Massachusetts who had dodged mustering in for war, had come west afterwards, the double-eagles of Yankee ancestors jangling in his pockets, ready for loan at usurious rates. He burned inwardly as the easterner's aggressive eyes ignored him, appraised the smooth loveliness of Barbara Redfield's body. He saw that the narrow eyes were hungry, aquisitive, admiring her small boots, divided skirt, waist, then seeking out the soft, rounded face of Silver Bluff's postmistress.

He said to Barbara, as if she were alone: "You'd best be getting back to town, my dear." He shot a troubled glance at the swirling clouds, building themselves into great, angry bubbles for their attack on the sun. "We're going to have a bad time of it; may ruin the wheat crops."

Then he looked across the full, rich heads of the grain, golden, bending under the rising wind, ready for the reapers.

"Why not leave that to Barbara?" Claiborne's sharp objection slapped against the banker. Hargreaves deliberately attempted to appear that he was seeing the livery man for the first time.

"Ah," he said, "The racing man." And then, to Barbara: "It would be better to come with me than to trust yourself to a man who doesn't know enough to come in when it rains."

"Sometimes, I think that rain is good for washing the soul—if it isn't too dirty," Clairborne drawled. "You rode out with me, Barbara."

The girl looked at him, the impact of her eyes telling him that she would play to the limit this small crisis. True, she had ridden out with him. By all rights, she should go on or return with him. But now she felt the power in her hands, the power to shape this tall, thin-faced man who stirred her as no other man ever had. She must make him understand the issue—bring him up sharply.

"Will you or won't you do as I ask?" she demanded.

"I will not."

Claiborne knew that those three words could lose Barbara, not for the distance into town but for the long road of life. But they were said.

He watched Barbara scowl at the sky, smile up at Hargreaves. "I think that riding to town with you would be the smart thing."

"Very well." Hargreaves' eyes carried his triumph to Claiborne. As Barbara swung her mount beside him, he asked: "Found a horse to run against Chico?"

"Not yet."

"You will. And remember, Claiborne—the two thousand dollars you're betting is just about the amount you owe me, due the sixth—that's Monday."

CLAIBORNE felt physical hunger for satisfaction against the goading man. First, Hargreaves was taking Barbara, and now, reminding him that if a challenging horse beat Chico on the Fourth of July—two days away—he would be forced to give him homestead and stable—all that he possessed in the world except Chico. Well, there were always

trail herds making up along the Nueces, the Colorado or the Rio Grande, bound across the plains to rail's end, or farther north to the Indian reservation—

"That's right," he said, a hard smile blanketing the emotions inside him. "So long."

He turned Chico into the wind, into the face of the storm, leaned forward over his mane, said softly: "Go, boy—"

The animal leaped ahead as if buckshot had stung his rump, giving his rider release from his wrath, driving with strong hoofs into the dirt of the dug road, a long alley between the fields of wheat. For a moment, Claiborne was back with Morgan's raiders; his mind heard the faint, clear command of the bugle, the firing of carbine and pistol, the rattle of sabres. Then the picture faded into the war-neglected Claiborne home in Arkansas, gave way again to the tinkle of spurs, the bawling of calves, the smell of salt from the gulf, the long sweep of the trail herds north to Dodge City. Finally, Silver Bluff, and Barbara, the livery stable and unwelcome roots in the ground. Dreams of shorthorns on the north range—

The sorrel gelding, heavy of barrel, with long-muscled legs ramming, covered a quarter-mile with driving impetus and Claiborne went onto the reins, stiff-legged himself out of his saddle, releasing a rebel yell from his pent-up lungs as the road turned at the shallow bluff west of the Indigo. The plunging horse cleared the gentle turn and started the slow drop into the centuries-old cut of the creek. Only then did Claiborne see the rig, the two frightened men in it, the rearing horse ahead, the panicky bay mare behind, in a hazy blur. At last Chico, mischievous and reluctant, surrendered to him, leaving him with a sense of guilt, the need of apology. He spun Chico, turned back up the road, where he faced the anger-stiffened faces of a tall, heavy man and a very much smaller specimen.

"Tryin' to run a man off the road, suh?" asked the big fellow. "If I hadn't heard youah shout—"

Claiborne quieted the dancing Chico with a neck pat, saw both men looking at the animal as if they knew and understood his spirit. At the same time he saw the led bay, a thoroughbred, a mare proud even in dust-breathing slow travel behind a rig.

"Beg your pardon," Claiborne said, his smile backing his words. "Chico here gets out of hand—and I didn't know I was so close to the draw when I started bringin' him up."

The big man's lips parted over his teeth. He waved a forgiving hand on a finger of which glittered a large stone in a heavy ring—the badge of a sporting man.

"Do some racin' myself," he said. "Mighty fine mount you have there, suh."

"Thanks. Maybe I'm proudin' a bit, but Chico's the fastest horse west of the Mississippi."

"Was," corrected the man in the rig. He looked behind him, waving his hand at the bay. "Until Lady crossed the same river, she was the fastest horse east of it."

Claiborne leaped at the challenge. "I've got two thousand dollars posted at Silver Bluff, five miles ahead, that says I'm right. Reckon we can settle this."

THE FIRST slashing drops of the boiling clouds plopped on hat brims, puffed dust from the road.

"I think, suh, my bay can beat youah mustang. My name's Harley, Harmon Harley. This gentleman is my rider, Danny Jones."

Claiborne introduced himself and asked: "Kentucky?"

"West Virginia, suh, although long gone."

Harley's eyes went up, drew back from the wrath of the clouds, asked quick questions about accomodations at Silver Bluff.

"*Palace Hotel's* the best we've got," Claiborne said. "There's three stables—Halliday's, the Hitching Post, and my own, at your service."

"*Palace* sounds fair to middlin' and your stable'll be fine, suh," Harley said, whipped the shaggy plains horse, and drove on, leaving Clai-

borne in the saddle, staring curiously after him. He finally shook his head wonderingly, rode on to cool out Chico. The rain was soaking into him now, and he welcomed it as would a prairie sapling, leaves wilted by drought. He kept Chico into the head of the slamming wind, the stinging drops. He came to Indigo creek, crossed at the ford, went on along the road toward Sabre City, reined when he saw the tracks of the rig wheels cutting back from the north along the river onto the road. He looked north into the great stands of cottonwood for a moment, watching rain's slanting charge, turned back, let Chico lope, homing to the warmth and grain in the stable.

In spite of the storm, which had turned the dust into gluey mud in Fremont street, he entered the stable to find a dozen or so men around the bay mare, studying her, pointing out what they thought might be her strength and weakness. As he dismounted behind the excited, curious men he saw Pasquale Ferino, the town barber; Jake Hosmer, proprietor of the *Palace;* Justice of the Peace Tate McDonald, who had been posted as one of the judges of the matched race; Joe Evans, lawyer, and a second of the three judges; Tim Sullivan, of the *Last Chance* bar, his own hostler and rider, Bucky Burns, and scattered ranchers and homesteaders.

"Good barrel," he heard above the buzzing speculation. "Means plenty of wind."

"Long legs. Should be fast." That was Sullivan, the saloon keeper.

Claiborne grounded his reins, worked forward, feeling his new importance in the sliding glances of the group, now that Chico had an opponent.

McDonald, one of the judges, seeing him, said: "Looks like Chico has a race on his hands."

"Could be," said Claiborne, easily, his hands exploring the animal, running over her long muscles, lifting her legs one after the other, studying her small feet. He examined the left forefoot, looked up at McDonald and Evans.

"Has a high nail here," he said, pointing to the hoof. "Might cause trouble. But maybe I'm loco on feet since Chico threw that shoe."

"It'll make no mind," said lawyer Evans, judicially. "Harley's gone to the hotel with his rider. Says he'll meet you in my office at nine tomorrow morning to set the race rules."

"Suits me," said Claiborne agreeably, turning away to Chico to unsaddle him, dry him, curry him and get him under blanket.

2

WHEN Claiborne arrived at Evans' crude pineboard office the next morning with Bucky Burns, he found Harmon Harley and his rider, Danny Jones; Evans and McDonald and the third judge, a rancher named Vance Hayward; several hangers-on; Clint Hargreaves, the banker and Bart Barrett, the town marshal, designated as stakeholder. The rules of the match were made quickly, with Lawyer Evans drawing them in longhand as fast as agreed upon. The course would be the quarter-mile straightaway, ploughed, harrowed and dragged, west of town. The start was to be "yes" and "no" under Harley's contention that Lady was skittish at gunfire; the horses were to run wide to avoid fouling, with Bucky Burns and Danny Jones up;

winner to take four thousand dollars; race to start at ten o'clock the next day, Saturday, July fourth.

"There's one thing more," Claiborne drawled. "I want it noted that if either horse is withdrawn from the race, the owner forfeits, and all bets are paid as they stand."

"I have no intention of withdrawing, suh," Colonel Harley said. "I'm agreeable."

This written in by Evans, the owners signed.

"Your wager?" Claiborne asked Harley.

"At youah service, suh."

He produced a letter of credit which he handed to Hargreaves.

"We haven't met," said Hargreaves, "but—"

Evans belatedly introduced the men and Hargreaves, after reading the letter, said: "This is satisfactory. I guarantee the wager. And, furthermore, Claiborne, while I hadn't met Harley, I've examined his entry. I am betting her, offering to stake the Harold Johns homestead, with water rights, which I own, against your homestead on the north range, together with your remaining equity in your stable, and your horse, Chico."

Claiborne swallowed as if to stop the sudden pounding of his heart, rubbed the moisture off his palms onto his levis. "Agreed."

After a flurry of wagers, the men left the smoke-choked office by ones and twos. Claiborne sauntered out under the hot steaming sun, stacked tobacco on paper, funneled it and lit. He started across the hardening mud toward his stable, turned his head slightly, saw Tim Sullivan, proprietor of the *Last Chance* bar dawdling along behind him. He entered the stable, went to the battered desk in the mixed office and tack room, turned to find Sullivan. The bar owner was studying the street furtively.

"What's up, Tim?" Claiborne drawled.

Sullivan, satisfied no one was within hearing, came forward and lowered his voice. "Seems like we could turn this here horse race into a big profit."

"How?" asked Claiborne, shielding his anger at Sullivan's sneaking manner, guessing ahead of him. "Night race the horses?"

"You know, then—"

"I've been around some. You boys got your heads together in the back room of the *Last Chance* and—"

"Both horses are in your stable, Branch. If you and Bucky Burns will make yourselves scarce tonight, we'd race 'em, and then we could bet on a sure thing."

Claiborne felt his body stiffening and his fists slowly balling. It was the implication that cut into him so deeply. Tim Sullivan and his poker players should have learned to know him better. "You're talking to the wrong man," he said.

His voice measured his next words: "Now, get out of here!"

He saw surprised fear boil into the dark eyes of Sullivan and the sag of muscles which came with mental and physical retreat. "I—I shouldn't have asked," Sullivan said, as he backed out. "I'm sorry, Branch."

"Don't try anything," Claiborne told him. "That's all."

Wrath at what the bar owner, and therefore many of the townspeople thought of him, continued to surge through him as he watched Sullivan scurry across the street. He took a gun and holster from its rack.

BRANCH walked out of the office, back into the stable, found his hostler-rider grooming Chico. Little Bucky, slight of build, small of bone, with a blond cowlick down over his forehead, might have been twenty-five, or ten years older. Burns looked from his hard-eyed boss to the weapon extended toward him and a question formed in his blood-shot blue eyes.

"There's apt to be trouble," Claiborne told him. "Some of the boys have the crooked idea of night racing Chico and Lady. Keep this handy—and wear it tonight."

Bucky Burns' eyebrows lifted in amazement. "That's rotten as frozen cattle," he said, taking the gun.

"You keep anybody but this Colonel Harmon Harley and Danny Jones,

his rider, from both Lady and Chico," Claiborne said and then sniffed.

"You've been hittin' the bottle again, Bucky."

"Only a couple of eye-openers. Bad night."

"Lay off. I know I can trust you when you're not full of rattlesnake oil. Right now, is the worst time you could pick—a crooked night ahead and a hard ride tomorrow."

Bucky Burns' right hand went up and an oath tumbled from his lips.

"You've broken it before," Claiborne said. "I'll be gone for a while."

"You bet, Branch."

Claiborne went out, crossed the street to the corner, looking into Pasquale Ferino's barber shop and the lobby of the *Palace Hotel*. He went through the swinging doors of the *Last Chance* saloon.

Squat, bulky and bandy-legged Sheriff Ed Johnson and his lanky deputy, Joe Vernon, having an eye-opener at the bar, gave him a questioning look.

"Seen this Colonel Harley?" Claiborne asked.

Others in the bar, hearing the question, gave their heads negative shakes.

"Not since about three ayem," Johnson said, "navigatin' down Fremont like a clipper ship roundin' th' horn."

Claiborne went into the *Palace* hotel, found Jake Hosmer, the proprietor, back of the desk. "Harley in his room?" he asked.

"Reckon," said the hotel man. "Twenty-three."

Claiborne went up the creaking stairs, turned left along the long hall through fumes of stale tobacco and the stench of long-dead alcohol, feeling the first oppression of the day's heat. He pounded on the rickety door of Harley's room. He heard the groan and the creak of protesting bedsprings, but got no answer. He knocked again.

"Who's theah?" It was a dry-throat voice through thin walls.

"Claiborne."

There were more groans, more com-

plaints from springs, and painfully indrawn breath, with the scrape of footgear. Then the door opened. The tall, heavy West Virginian stood in red underwear, with his boots on, his hair standing on end, his face lined with sleep which had started with stupor.

"Come in, suh?"

"Thanks."

He watched the colonel's eyes lift to a bottle on the bureau, watched his dry lips ask: "Drink?"

"Too early."

"Then youah pardon, suh. The night was long and wet."

Harley walked to the bureau and, seeing him walk for the first time, Claiborne noticed that he limped. He dragged his right leg and his boot scraped the floor.

Harley half-filled a tumbler, gulped down the raw liquor, and, with his face screwed into a knot, he walked to the wash basin. He filled the tumbler with water from the crockery pitcher and downed it. "The mawnin' seems brighter now. What brings you here whilest the grass is dew wet, Claiborne?"

"I want you to take Lady out of my stable, Harley."

The man's bloodshot eyes grew smaller with offense. "You offah a mighty small sample of western hospitality, suh—"

"That's not the point. We race tomorrow and withdrawal means forfeit. If anything happened to your

mare, I would feel it was my fault."

The sullen smoulder cooled off of the man's features. "I understand, suh."

"You'll do it?"

"Ah'll have my Danny at yuh service, suh. And where would you suggest I—"

"I suggest nothing. As I told you when I met you, there's Halliday's and the Hitchin' Post. That's up to you."

"My responsibility, of course."

"You've got it. The whole town's bettin'; I want no man to say I advised you."

Claiborne put his hand on the white porcelain knob of the door. "There's one thing more, Colonel," he said, emphasizing the title. "That shout, as you called it yesterday, was a rebel yell, pretty well known in West Virginia—most of all to colonels."

CLAIBORNE watched the rising heat of anger redden the colonel's bloated face, his feet separate, his body, grotesque in the underwear, set itself for a moment. "What is the meaning of this, suh?" he blustered.

"I wanted you to know—that I know."

Harley bowed slightly. "At youah service, suh."

"I wouldnt be surprised if you would be," Claiborne said as their eyes took measure. He opened the door, went into the hallway, pulled the door behind him. He went downstairs, where Hosmer stared knowingly, set his face for conversation, opened with: "Is it Lady or Chico?"

"It's anybody's choice," Claiborne flung over his shoulder, leaving Hosmer's mouth open.

He got the same questions from everyone he passed as his heels pounded fast down the boardwalk. office—Barbara Redfield's, low and that was when he passed the post office—Barbara Redfield's low and tense, coming from the wicket just back of the door. "Branch!" It was a new tone, a fear-rich tone, insistent.

It halted him, swung him into the small building to face her as she came from behind the wicket. Then he felt more than the warmth of her hand on his arm. There was the tight grip of her fingers.

"What is it?"

"Branch—I'm afraid. There's something strange going on. I—"

His lips tightened over his teeth and then he said, hurtfully: "Tell it to Clint Hargreaves."

Her eyes were wide with her apprehension as she turned her face up to him, beautiful, desirable. "This is no time for that. Branch—I'm sorry I left you yesterday—I—"

"We can't talk now, Barbara; it's time for the Sabre City stage and I've got to get the relay ready—"

"Branch, you must stop the race. It'll clean out the town—and you—"

"I'm going." He paused. "I'll meet you on Paradise Mesa road near the gully at eight o'clock."

"I'll see you then, Branch; I'll tell you something that'll change your stubborn mind."

"Eight o'clock." He turned away as the grip on his arm relaxed reluctantly, hurried from the post office, went onward to the stables, ignoring the calls for a tip on the race from the loungers under the gallery in front of Bexler's drug store. As he went by the stage office he saw Kingston, the fat, derbied drummer from Kansas City, heard him say: "Cancel my passage for today, Bess. I'm bettin' everything but my sample case. I'll stay 'til Sunday."

CLAIBORNE kept going to the stable, found Bucky Burns already bringing up one of the groomed and sleek teams for the stage. He got the other team. While he was leading the pair from the corral at the rear, he heard the dusty thud of hoofs in Fremont street, the creak of the concord, the "whoa" of the driver, clank of chains, rasp of brake, rattle of gear as the horses protested their bits.

He worked with Burns at harnesses, nodded distantly to Barbara, straight and willowy against the shimmering heat, as she brought outgoing mail sack, picked up the incoming. He took the hot, weary animals into the rising, fetid heat of

the stable, found Danny Jones there with silver to pay for Lady's board. He took the money, counted out change.

"Where to, should anybody ask?" he queried.

"Hitchin' Post," the young rider said.

"Luck," Claiborne told him and watched the small man lead the mare into the curious stares and speculating talk of street-loafers.

After the stage animals had been watered, cooled out and grained he did half a dozen chores, finally looked through the gape of the front door to see sunbeams, gold-flecked by traffic-whipped dust, slanting across Silver Bluff's main thoroughfare.

"Better work Chico out," he told Burns.

The rider nodded, saddled and soon was gone. When he got back, Claiborne told him to get his supper. He sponged the animal, curried him and, before blanketing him, got some saddle soap and mixed it with water. Then he rubbed the sticky concoction along Chico's spine, making a ribbon about three inches wide and running the length of the saddle.

When this had dried stiffly, he blanketed him, led him to his stall and gave him feed.

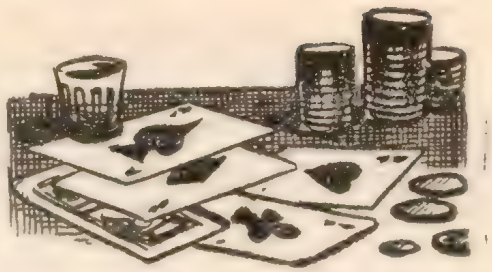
Bucky Burns came back, swung on his belt and gun, looking like a gnome with a cannon at his side "Stayin' off the lightnin'?" Claiborne asked.

"I give you my word didn't I?"

"Remember what I told you about that gun. If anybody comes spookin' into the stable, use it; it makes you as big as the biggest. Now, I'm goin' to get cleaned up and eat. After that I'm ridin' out on one of the rental horses. I'll take over from you around ten o'clock, so's you can get some sleep."

"Yes, Branch."

The southerner went to Pasquale Ferino's barber shop, wondering at Barbara's desperation. What information could she have for him which was so secret and so important? He thought about it while Pasquale shaved him, while he soaked himself in the hot water of the barber shop tub. After that, he went to



his room, saw it was time for supper. He went into the dining room, surprised to see Barbara eating with Hargreaves at a small table, looking more provocative than upset. She gave him a smile and an airy wave. Hargreaves ignored his presence.

He didn't enjoy his meal. He ate little and rapidly and, when he left the place, Hargreaves and Barbara had their heads close together over their food.

BUCKY BURNS greeted him as he came into the stable, saddled one of the better rental horses. He rode north along the Paradise Mesa road. The day heat clung lingeringly to the land. He felt more than he smelled the rich, earthy odor of ripening grain, looked up now and then at the millions of stars which sprinkled the sky with dancing dots here, misted it there. When he reached the gully he pulled off to the side of the thoroughfare, waited, easy in his saddle, fighting off his impatience. Finally, anxiously, he heard the thud of the hoofs of her mount, whistled softly, tightening all over as she came beside him and he breathed the freshness of her. It was as if something had lighted a fire within him as she came over closer, saying softly: "Branch!"

"What's wrong?" he asked, tensely. "Why must you see me?"

"Stop that race!"

"I tell you I can't. If I withdraw I lose. So does everybody else who's bet on Chico."

"But something has to be done, Branch; there's something bad come up."

"What?"

"I shouldn't be telling you. It's against regulations—but Clint Hargreaves and this Colonel Harley have

known each other for some time."

"How do you know that?"

"They've exchanged several letters. Most of it's been done since you offered to race Chico. They're working something crooked, Branch."

He was glad the darkness of the night hid the assault of grimness on his face. After a moment, he said, easily: "I'd forget it. Hargreaves is welcome to write to anybody after I've posted my money for a race, tellin' 'em to bring a horse to beat Chico. And there's nothin' Hargreaves would like better than to ruin me." He paused, then: "You were with Hargreaves tonight—"

"Certainly. I was trying to find out what was behind those letters—trying to make him betray himself."

"Confederate spy, eh? Seems as if you were likin' your work."

He didn't try to keep the sarcasm from his voice—wanted her to know she had hurt him. "Don't talk that way—I tell you, there's going to be trouble. You seem to resent my efforts to help."

He heard anger creep into her voice. He saw her again at dinner with the banker. "I can take care of myself," he said, with flat finality.

"It's nice," she said, whipping the words in shape under the hammer of quick anger, "to know one so self-sufficient. Go it alone."

Before he could make a move to stop her she wheeled her mount, used her quirt and was away.

The touch of Claiborne's hand on the neck of the rental animal took plunging desire from his muscles. "Take it easy, boy," he said, listening to the pound of hoofs ahead of him. After they'd died, he set out slowly for the dimly lighted cowtown, no man to race after someone who didn't want him; he'd given too much of his pride away to her now.

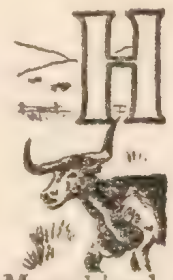
The renter was a good road horse, covered ground rapidly back to Silver Bluff, took him directly into the stable, anxious to be rid of his burden and secure reward from his trough. As he dismounted, Claiborne felt a strange emptiness to the place.

"Bucky!" he called.

The only answer he got was the stirring restlessness of the horses. Anger leaped through him as his eyes sought Chico's stall. The big racer was there. Had the little rider broken his promise at some bar or over some bottle? He started searching, unmindful of anything except that if Burns had given in to his thirst, tomorrow's race might well be lost—no other rider knew Chico so well.

Swiftly he went from stall to stall, through the office, back out to the rear of the building, sentinelled by great bales of hay. The bales had been pulled irregularly and there were gaps at their bases, cloaked in shadow, away from the high lantern at the front of the establishment.

3



HE FOUND the body of Bucky Burns lying in one of these crevices. It wasn't drink this time. Burns had a knot, the size of half an egg, on the side of his head. His hair was matted with blood. More blood had run down his cheek.

Claiborne was shaking the little man in hope of reviving him when, from somewhere above him, a hurtling weight struck his head and shoulders with a sickening crash that tore ligaments. He was driven face down into the mud floor of the stable. His head blew up.

His next conscious thought was the throbbing in his jammed shoulders and the ache in his head. Then he tried to move and found he had been trussed up like a calf for branding. He moved painfully, tried to put the force of his burning muscles against his bonds—and go nowhere. The darkness bothered him until he realized he had been pulled into a stall.

He listened, heard the sound of heavy breathing, somewhere in the next stall. "Bucky—that you?" he asked, and got no answer.

Against the protests of his battered body and the lariat which bound him, he managed to roll, jackknife and hump himself around the

boarded partition, to bump against clothing and flesh. There was enough light here to see the small, huddled and bound form of his rider. As he felt gathering strength he continued to jar Burns' body with his own calling: "Bucky! Bucky! Wake up."

At first he got only groans. After minutes of assault he heard Burns' thick protest:

"Go 'way. Lemme—"

Then consciousness pushed itself into the brain of the rider, his body jerked. "What th' devil?"

"It's me Bucky—Branch. You've got to come back to life. If we work together we can get out of these hog harnesses."

That took fumbling, mistakes, groping until Claiborne was able to get at and undo the bonds which were biting into his companion, using the free fingers of his wrists bound behind him.

Knot by knot he loosened the twenty-five foot rope. His hands free, Burns was able to untie his ankles, groaningly get to his hands and knees, and then release Claiborne.

The two men sat on the stall floor, unkinking, gathering strength, looking at each other.

Claiborne said: "You're sure no sight for sore eyes. What happened?"

"You don't look like no angel yoreself," the rider replied. "I dunno what happened. I was just goin' out to the corral. Seemed like I heard the horses restless. I got outside th' building, in th' shadows. Somebody must of dropped an anvil on me."

Claiborne, as he listened, pulled himself to his feet, looked over at Chico's stable. Alarm already had pushed its way into his mind. "I think Chico's been night raced," he said, as he went toward the animal. "Anyways, I'll soon find out."

He pulled the blanket from the animal, felt smooth, even hair along the area where he'd put the mixture of water and saddle soap. "Yep. He has been, all right."

"How d'you know?" Burns asked.

"I put saddle soap on his back and let it dry," Claiborne explained. "It

made the hair mat down. A saddle has rubbed the mat out. Hair's soft again."

Burns eyed him with a mixture of wonder and admiration. "Bright as a tack!" he exclaimed. "What now?"

"I'm goin' over to th' Hitchin' Post," Claiborne said, grimly, as he felt the impact of what the night race meant. By dawn, and even now, plenty of people knew which horse had won. Everybody in the know would bet on the sure thing. Those who hadn't would bet on the loser. Between the wise guys and the know nothings the town would go crazy. As Barbara had predicted, its whole future was at stake.

CLAIBORNE found the rental horse still saddled and bridled, leisurely munching hay in spite of his bit. He led the animal to the front of the building, went into his office and tack room, slapped around his lean waist a cartridge belt and holster, the latter containing a Colt's .44. He checked the cylinder and action. Then he took a scabbarded Winchester from the pine wall, gave it careful attention, lashed it to his saddle.

Burns spent most of his time watching and accomodating a large chew of tobacco to his mouth. As Claiborne mounted, he spoke, as if addressing himself: "Wonder which horse won?"

"That," said Claiborne, "is one of the things I aim to find out."

"Luck," said Burns. "I'll be standin' by."

Claiborne rode into the silent, star-watched street, dark under the velvet sky, the cool air which presaged the dawn clearing his head and driving the pain from it. One dim light shown in the lobby of the

Palace hotel. Lamps were out even in the *Last Chance* bar as Claiborne rode up Fremont street, across First and into Carson, where the Hitching Post was hedged on one side by a blacksmith shop and on the other by an implement store. The siding buildings were dark under the blackness of the moonless night. A high lantern swung from the rafters made a bleak pattern of light and shadow.

Claiborne didn't expect to find anyone, unless it was Harley's rider, Danny Jones, in the stable, which was open for the convenience of late travellers but did not do enough business to justify a night hostler. Nevertheless, as he entered, he called the name of the proprietor: "Hogan! Jim Hogan!"

The only reply was the shifting of animals in their stalls and the hollow echo of his voice slapping back at him from the end of the long building.

His search yielded no trace of Hogan, of Jones.

Nor was Lady there.

Thinking that all this didn't add up, he blew out the lamp and mounted the rental horse. Where was Lady? The animals had been raced a long time before. Proof lay in the fact that Chico was cool, without cinch marks or sweat under his blanket. Only the rubbed out saddle soap was the giveaway. Lady should have been back in her stall long since.

He sent the whole story through his mind, hoping to get to some conclusion. After he had offered to race Chico against all comers, Harley had appeared with Lady at almost the last minute and had accepted his challenge; Harley had known Clint Hargreaves previously, according to Barbara, which meant that they might be in some kind of cahoots. Furthermore, Harley had donned the raiment and exaggerated accent of a southerner, a Yankee sharper who wanted to give the impression that he was from some other part of the country than the banker, to add to the illusion they were strangers.

Hargreaves and Harley had been backing Lady. The local sentiment was for Chico. Sullivan, of the locals, had boldly suggested to him that the animals be night-raced. Then, the locals had managed to carry out that object so they could bet on a sure thing.

Sullivan had come to him—

He rode from the stable into the alley, tied the horse some distance from the rear of the *Last Chance* bar, behind which Sullivan had his living quarters. The lamp was out in the bedroom and the window to the back was open to the night air.

CLAIBORNE went cat-footed to the side door, pounded.

The only answer was the faint creek of bedsprings, the careful movement of life across the floor. Claiborne toed swiftly around to the window, looked in, saw in the faint light the shadowy form in his night shirt opening his door against the night with his left hand. A shotgun was in his right.

Claiborne's .44 was trained on Sullivan's back. "Drop that gun!" he ordered, as he threw a leg over the sill.

The saloonkeeper swung, surprise and fear popping his eyes and dropping his jaw as he saw the ghostly man, the unghostly gun in the eerie light.

"Throw the gun on the bed and light your lamp!" Claiborne ordered. "I'm aimed to shoot something and you aren't."

The saloonkeeper saw the logic of this statement, backed down, tossed his weapon on the bed. His hands trembled in the dark as he fumbled for a match and the room slowly came into relief under the glow.

"What do you want?" the barkeeper asked, as the stable owner swung himself into the room without taking the muzzle of his gun off his target.

"Lady and Chico were raced tonight."

"I don't know anything about it."

"You're lyin', Sullivan."

"I tell you—I didn't have anything to do with it."

Claiborne took the shells from the shotgun, pocketed them, holstered

his own gun, advanced on Sullivan, who stood by the lamp. He grabbed the flannel night gown, tightened it around Sullivan's neck and slapped his face.

"Maybe you'd like to get roughed up a bit," Claiborne said. "On the other hand, maybe you'll use horse sense. The whole town's future is hangin'. There's crookedness goin' on. If you want to ruin yourself and Silver Bluff, keep your mouth shut. Then I'll beat it open and you won't have got anywhere, anyways."

The saloonkeeper's face sagged. "I—I didn't have anything to do with racing the horses, Claiborne—"

"But you know who did."

"Don't even know that. Honest I don't."

Claiborne tightened his grip on the flannel night shirt and slammed Sullivan's back against the wall so hard his head shook the boards. "Who won?"

"I—I found that out—Chico."

"Who told you?"

"Danny Jones—the colonel's rider."

"Who put the bee in your bonnet to try the stunt?"

"Danny Jones."

"Why?"

"He said he was sore at the colonel, said the colonel hadn't paid him. He said he couldn't pull Lady so Chico would win because the colonel was too smart for that. But he said we could sneak the horses out and find out which was the fastest. Then we could bet on a sure thing."

"How much did you give him?"

"Two hundred dollars, so he could bet on Chico."

"And you don't know who raced the animals?"

"No. I got cold feet after I talked to you."

Claiborne swung the saloon man away from the wall, gave him a quarter turn, and slammed him across the bed.

"Nice goin'," he said. "A fine piece of business to be mixed up in. Sleep, now, if you can."

HE WENT out the door, walked to the rental horse and swung up on him. He rode to his own stable slowly. The pattern was beginning to take shape in his mind now, and with it came one sharp, small detail. That was the track of the rig coming into the Sabre City road from the roadless brush which lined Indigo creek. An ordinary traveller wouldn't stop like that in the late afternoon, with a storm threatening, and when only a few miles from his goal.

At the stable, he turned in, found Burns wide awake in a chair, his six-gun across his lap.

"Who won?" Burns asked.

"Chico," Claiborne told him. "I'm ridin' out the Sabre City road. I'll be back by race time."

"I'll be here," the little rider said.

Claiborne rode east in a long, steady lope, racing against approaching day. Already false dawn was at hand when he reached Indigo creek. The road was fast, but the ride into the creek and north along it was hard. Brush whipped against his legs, cottonwood limbs scraped him, tore at him. The sure-footed animal stumbled when stones rolled under his hoofs. There was better going higher up on the mesa, but he stayed low as the day became lighter to avoid being high-lighted against the awakening sky.

The horse skittered as quail flushed, as jack rabbits took out from almost underfoot, but kept going.

It was that way for half an hour, and then Claiborne came to a sharp defile, a narrow canyon, with a wall block fifty feet high. The creek rushed, deep and wild, filling the passage. There was only one thing to do—double back half a hundred yards, take to a draw, follow it up to the flat above.

Claiborne made it slowly, carefully, and came onto the mesa, knee deep in drying bunch grass. He turned north again, riding briefly. The sky to the east was paling now, with a faint tinge of orange along the ridges, indicating the approaching sun.

Once again, he started down along the river bed.

He heard, then, the nicker of a horse, flung himself forward to grab the nostrils of his mount to prevent him from answering.

He heard the sharp slap of the rifle rising off the canyon walls even after the bullet tore along his head, turned the world red, and sent it spinning crazily around him.

He fought to regain his senses even as the horse plunged beneath him and whirled. Instinct told him to grab the animal's mane, get it in a death grip.

Then he passed out completely.

4

BARBARA Redfield was awakened by the pounding on the door next to hers. An indefinable fear crept over her as she lay, her body taut, her eyes wide, her ears alert. The pounding ceased when she heard Dr. Kenneth Smith, who occupied the adjoining suite, call out grumpily: "Who's there?"

"Bucky Burns!" came the alarmed voice; "Doc, you've got to come quick!"

"What's wrong?"

"It's Branch Claiborne, doc. He rode out on a rental horse. Jest now the horse come back, saddle empty. There's blood all over th' saddle and th' horse."

"Go harness my rig," the doctor ordered. Burns' feet beat a fast departure.

Barbara's heart pounded, she felt dizzy as she sat upright, swung her feet to the floor. Branch hurt, and possibly dead! A sudden guilt swept her when she thought of the way she had treated him the night before, and then that passed into a desire to help.

She banged on the thin wall to the adjacent room. "Yes?" she heard the doctor say, as he shuffled around, making sounds of hurried dressing.

"It's me—Barbara. I'm coming along."

"Good girl!" Dr. Smith replied. "The more eyes the better—and I'll probably need a nurse."

Hastily she poured water from the big white pitcher into the basin, dashed it over her face, thinking as she did so, *I don't care about Silver Bluff's future, I don't care who wins the race now, all I want to know is that my man is still alive. I don't even care about the ranch on the north range, because in this country there's always a new start—*

She combed out her hair, did it quickly, and then, tall and moulded of form, she took off her nightgown, put on her underthings, all the while speculating and praying and hoping that she'd have Branch and the future with him, good, or bad, or here, or there—but always together. She dressed quickly in plaid waist, a divided denim skirt, and her riding boots as protection against rocks and brush.

By this time, Dr. Smith, a large, heavy-set man whose silvered head showed he'd long since seen middle age, was rapping on her door. "Come, come, girl!" he called, even as she opened it. He was standing there, anxious in his frock coat, his wide hat, carrying the black bag which had become a part of him.

"I'm ready," she said. He took her arm and they hurried along the hall, down the stairs and through the small lobby to Fremont street. Even in her perturbation she noticed that the thoroughfare was filled with people; that rigs and wagons were tied to the hitching posts; that homesteaders, ranchers, townsfolk were bustling about excitedly, despite the fact that it was a holiday and only an hour after sunrise. She and the physician ploughed determinedly and swiftly across Fremont street to Branch Claiborne's stables. Before any of the people she knew were aware of her speedy passage—and she knew them all as post office customers—she and Dr. Smith were piling into the waiting rig. Bucky had saddled a mount.

"Couldn't find Sheriff Johnson,"

Burns said, as he vaulted to his horse. "Guess he's millin' around like all these others. They're race mad. Never seen anything like it! Well, let's get goin'."

Once out of the two-block business district of Fremont street, Dr. Smith told Barbara, who needed no telling, to watch both sides of the road and gave his horse her head. Burns weaved back and forth on his mount, studying the weeded sides of the gravelly thoroughfare, peering for a crushed spot in the tall grain beyond.

BARBARA'S heart sank as they found no trace of Branch by the time they reached the turn and switch back leading down into the bed of Indigo creek. By now the tension in her had mounted to a point where she wanted to scream, and her eyes and head ached from concentration on every possible spot where Claiborne might be found.

They reached the ford, crossed it, and still there was no sign showing where Claiborne might lie.

"Take it easy, girl," Dr. Smith said, feeling her tense fear. Then he added gruesomely, but practically, as he scanned the sky: "He's not dead yet. There's no buzzards circling."

Barbara was clutching to this scant assurance when Bucky, who had been well to the north side of the road, reined abruptly and looked down. "Whoa!" he shouted. Dr. Smith pulled up.

"Horses goin' this way," said Burns, pointing north into the bursh, along the side of the creek. He turned his mount in, and, as the rig followed, they heard his call: "Here he is!"

"Alive?" Barbara heard herself scream, and the voice didn't sound at all like her own, but the cry of her mother when they'd found the body of her father pierced with Indian arrows.

Dr. Smith pulled up, dropped his reins and, with an agility which belied his age, grabbed his bag and leaped from the rig. Barbara was right behind him. They raced into a clearing and found Claiborne sprawled grotesquely. Burns was bending over him, his hand on his chest.

"Heart's still beatin', doc," he said.

"Barbara, get the canteen from the rig," Dr. Smith ordered. "Fill it with fresh water at the creek."

She did as she was told.

Then she shook off the paralysis of fear which had beset her on sight of Claiborne's blood-smeared face and hair. Instinctively, she sank to her knees, cradled his head in her arms. Smith gave her a wise old smile as he put a piece of cotten loaded with spirits of ammonia under Claiborne's nose. The wounded man gasped, coughed, opened his eyes. They went to Barbara's face. They were filled with mixed disbelief and wonder as he muttered: "This must be heaven!"

"T'isn't heaven, and I've got work to do," Smith said, with false grumpiness. "This is not time for romance."

The first thing he did was give his patient a large shot of whiskey followed by cold water from the creek. Then, swiftly, with the help of Barbara, he used the rest of the water to cleanse the wound, then painted it with iodine, applied ointment and bandage.

"Who shot you?" Smith asked.

"Dunno, doc. Got bushwhacked and must've stuck to my saddle a bit. Near the road, aren't we?"

"Right, Branch."

Claiborne sat up, leaving the pillow of Barbara's lap. "Do you think you're able to ride in with us?" she asked, tenderly.

Claiborne gave her a crooked grin. "More tired than hurt," he said. "Only I'm not ridin' in."

He saw fear push the tenderness from Barbara's eyes.

"I'm goin' to find out who shot me. Then I'll be in."

Barbara said: "No, you can't—"

Dr. Smith, wise to the ways of men, put his arm over the girl's shoulder. "He'd never forgive himself or you if he didn't," he said, and made his voice so that Barbara would understand. Claiborne held out his hands to Barbara and Burns

and they pulled him to his feet. He shook his head slowly to get rid of his dizziness and then said:

"Barbara, you're riding back to town with doc in the rig. I'm taking Bucky's horse, and he'll pile in with you. Doc, in case I don't get back in time, I appoint you to 'rep' for me, and it's your job to see that Bucky rides and the race is fair and square. You know the terms I made."

Dr. Smith nodded. "Can't afford to withdraw," he agreed. "Whole town's bettin' on Chico and everybody'd lose everything if Chico didn't run."

"You've got it, doc."

He picked up the reins of the horse Burns had ridden, swung into the saddle, automatically checked the Colt which was still in its holster, tried to ease Barbara's fear with a confident grin, and said, "so long."

Under light spur and rein, he turned the animal toward the brush along the creek.

Smith watched the tall rider for a moment, some of his own youth coming back into his eyes, and then told his horse, "giddap!" The horse pulled the rig containing the trio back to the highway, lengthened his run under a touch of Dr. Smith's whip.

"Doc—what's he up to?" asked Barbara, worry still goading her heart, fear pressing down on her. Breathing came hard to her chest.

"I don't know, girl. Only he knows. When a young man's got things on his mind, age and women don't ask questions—or worry."

FOR BARBARA, the ride back into town was a nightmare of speculation. And guessing did her no good. If anything, it made her older in a sense that she was getting a new perspective on herself as a woman. Don't ask questions, Dr. Smith had said, and he might have added, don't try to be boss. This was the time of her surrender to the man she had guided, domineered, sought to mould into the form she wanted.

It was approaching race time when the rig clattered into Fremont street, almost deserted, the people having taken their bumble and excitement to the track. Dr. Smith let Bucky out of the rig to light saddle Chico and ride him there, turned to Barbara: "We'd best go ourselves," he said. "There'll be plenty of arranging before the race."

Barbara was amazed at the turnout when the rig reached the flat plain west of town. The panorama excited her, and, while it failed to wipe out her worry over Claiborne, it shared her mind. For the first time, she realized the growth and approaching solidity of Silver Bluff and the homestead and range land which it centered. There must be more than two thousand people milling around, placing bets, talking crops, cattle, weather and prospects.

The quarter-mile strip was lined with heavy farm wagons, buckboards, and rigs, the early comers, having found places at the finish line, held back by ropes. Men on foot and other men on horseback moved among townswomen, dressed in their best taffeta, presenting parasols to the broil of the July sun.

Children flocked around the soft-drink and ice cream stand set up by Gerald Fay, who ran the parlor in town and, at a discreet distance, Tim Sullivan was dispensing red rye and beer over a temporary bar of pine boards set on saw horses to flat-hatted cowboys, duded up townsmen, homesteaders getting the plough dust out of their throats.

Over it all, Barbara thought, suspense hung like the shimmering heat waves silvering the hot horizon.

She saw a fourth long table, with Bart Barrett, the town marshal, behind it, and started at the sight of arguing, gesticulating men, three deep. She was puzzled by the huge stack of gear behind the table, where two men sided Barrett in a mad scramble of saddles, guns, bedrolls, and even hats. Behind this pile, horses were picketed. There were wagons and rigs, their shafts empty and down. One man seemed to be the center of attention. She looked closely and saw it was Harmon Harley.

She stopped dead in her tracks. "What is all that, doc?"

He smiled down at her. "The boys," he said, "are betting everything they own—mostly on Chico. Their stuff is tagged. That Colonel Harley's takin' most of the bets—backin' Lady."

"But—those horses and wagons—"

Dr. Smith's face grew grim. "A lot of goods is going to have new owners in not so long," he said, "including land on which men have toiled three years to win and hold."

"You don't like it," Barbara said.

"It's not right for the town." He looked ahead of him, saw Lady, restive, dancing her eagerness, being led toward the judges' stand by the rider, Danny Jones. The three judges stood on the small, raised board platform, watching the horse approach—Joe Evans, the lawyer, Justice of the Peace McDonald, and the rancher, Vance Hayward. Clint Hargreaves, on the ground, in rainbow vest, frock coat, and beaver hat, clinging to tradition even under the attack of the heat, tipped his hat to Barbara and bowed from his immaculate waist. She returned the flourish lightly.

Evans, McDonald and Hayward stepped down from the platform to inspect the entry and, while they were so occupied, Bucky Burns rode up on Chico, prancing to the excitement surrounding him, skittish and nervous. Burns steadied him with a pat of his hand on graceful neck, dismounted, and offered him for inspection.

Barbara saw Harley leave the betting stand, limp into the circle of judges, Burns and Jones, and Dr. Smith.

"Where's Claiborne?" he asked, looking around him.

"He's got a headache," answered Dr. Smith, not untruthfully. "It laid him out flat. I'm repping for him."

"I object!" Harley complained. "He must be heah, or—"

Justice McDonald cut him off. "There's nothing in the race agreement sayin' he's got to be present. We'll proceed, gentlemen."

The judges instructed the riders as to the rules.

After that, Barbara watched the arrangements speed up, with the starter getting his orders and riding out toward the far end of the stretch; the crowd tensing as he rode, and word spreading that the race was about to start; men deserting the Sullivan bar, glasses in hand, to crowd as close to the finish line as possible; others haggling over last-minute bets through Barrett and his helpers, and then joining the drift toward the track; Lady and Chico, hoofs digging, impatient, almost breaking from restraint, tugging against Jones and Burns toward the starting mark.

Barbara felt the portentious hush and her heart began to pound; it was as if even the sky had tightened. And her mind went to Claiborne swiftly, caressingly. *He's all right*, she thought, *he's got to be all right —only why isn't he here?*

Then as she held her place close to the finish line, against the pushing and jostling, she heard the rising rumble of sound along the far-stretched line of spectators: "They're off!"

CLAIBORNE, moving swiftly but painstakingly, sought the trail of a horse going north and one going south along Indigo creek, and soon found them. Carefully his eyes followed the double trail. His awareness this time led him to ride with drawn revolver. Eventually he reached the blocking cliff through which the Indigo ran deep and fast, turned up the same draw and sent his mount onto the mesa, alert, waiting, studying. He determined the direction from which he had been bushwhacked by placing himself in the same position and calculating the angle of the bullet along his head.

He rode down into the brush, found what he wanted. There was the empty shell from a Winchester, and the dragging marks of a lame man. Two bits of evidence the marks on the ground identifying

Harley, were in the center of a clearing beside the creek filled with the roots of what had been lush grass. Claiborne found a stake hole in the middle.

But he had not yet found what he wanted.

He went on to another clearing, where a picketed horse had eaten a circle out of the grass, always on the alert for movement of sound which would betray a presence. He paused a moment, sensing rather than hearing something—and, during that pause came the nicker of a horse farther ahead.

He rode swiftly then, low on the neck of his animal, hard on his stirrups, unmindful of the sting of brush, waiting for the crack of a rifle, hoping that his helter-skelter, zig-zag run would dodge lead.

No weapon spoke.

He rode into a clearing. The mare he sought stood there, picketed, looking up, ears back with alarm and curiosity.

"Now for a fast change," he told his mount as he hit ground, removed his gear, used the mare's rope to snub her tight to a cottonwood. Saddle and bridle set, he dropped the halter and rope from the mare, mounted.

The ride back to the deserted streets of Silver Bluff was fast. Claiborne pounded along Fremont street, west to the track. He arrived as the roar of "They're off" reached his ears. Coming in from behind, against the backs of the excited watchers, his approach was unobserved by the hundreds whose eyes and minds were on the drama of the racing horses and the stupendous outcome. He tooled his mount close behind the judge's stand, where he could see, yet not be noticed.

The hoofs of the animals, growing louder, the sight of Chico in the lead, heartened him. Then his world seemed to stand still and he felt the violent, oppressing hush as Lady, a length behind, began to creep up on Chico who, he saw, was giving everything of heart and muscle.

Lady's advance was relentless as time seemed to have been suspended. At last the now silent crowd and Claiborne himself accepted the inevitable, even before Lady came across the line a full length ahead of the Silver Bluff racer.

These folks, Claiborne thought, as he heard the angry buzz of consternation, wrath and downright disbelief, *have bet their shirts and their future, and there's going to be trouble unless—*

His lips tightened into a thin line as he listened to the rising cries of the crowd which was turning into a mob; watched the riders run out their mounts, return to the finish line for announcement of what the stunned multitude already so tragically knew.

As Burns and Jones approached he picked up the high spots of the tableau—the judges turning slowly to face the horses and riders—the bewildered, sullen crowd moving toward the stand—Clint Hargreaves, an imperious and smug grimness on his face saying, "I told you I always win"—Harley fatuously grinning his triumph—

"Just a minute, gentlemen, before you announce the winner." Claiborne spoke in a low voice, but in the tragedy-charged moment, his words reached out to the fringes of the crowd.

The judges faced him, agape at his presence and his appearance. "I'm enterin' a protest," he said, levelly.

As he spoke his eyes were nailing each move of Hargreaves, Harley and Jones. He saw that a six-gun swung on the hip of Harley, watched the hand with the big ring on it.

"What is it, Branch?" asked Justice McDonald.

"Judge," said Claiborne, "look at the mare I'm ridin'. You Evans, and you, Hayward. Then look at Harley's mare."

McDonald was the first to speak.

"They're twins—"

"A ringer—" added Hayward.

"That's right," Claiborne said, clearly. He surveyed the crowd, hand on the butt of his revolver. "Stand back!" he snapped.

The crowd halted its advance under the lash of his voice.

"You, Evans and McDonald, look at the left forefoot of my mount. You'll see the high nail you looked at day before yesterday in my stable. Look at Jones' horse; there's no high nail."

He paused, watched fear rise into the blanching face of Hargreaves, anger and hate flush the features of Harley, the eyes of Jones look for some word from either—and get none.

"I hereby claim, under the race rules," Claiborne said, his voice rising to a booming peak over the now nonplussed and excitement-frozen crowd, "that Harley entered the horse I'm on, withdrew it for that faster ringer over there, and thereby forfeits the race to Chico because of that withdrawl—"

CLAIBORNE saw the flash of the brilliant stone in the heavy ring on Harley's right hand, and his gun came out, a split second ahead of Harley's draw. His Colt coughed, boomed, and Harley's gun blasted over the heads of the crowd as the slug hit his shoulder and knocked his gun arm backward.

Almost at the same instant, Hargreaves went for his sleeve gun, a derringer.

Whipped by cold anger, Claiborne spurred his mount, charged into the two wild shots. Hargreaves turned, face white, and ran. Deliberately, Claiborne rode after him, smiled grimly when the beaver went flying, bent low in the saddle, jammed his left hand down into the banker's coat collar and picked him up, brought him back, Hargreaves' long legs kicking frantically through the air. When he reached the judges' stand he flung the man forward so that he sprawled in the dirt.

"And now, gentlemen," he asked. "What's your decision?"

"We declare the race is forfeited by Harley," said McDonald. "Chico wins!"

Claiborne sensed and then saw the first stir in the mob as it awakened from its shock. Barbara, hands clawing, arms outstretched, then elbowing, then pulling, was fighting toward him.

He dismounted in time to take her in his arms. "It's all right, it's all right," he managed to say as she clung to him, sobbing.

"Oh, Branch," was all she could say. "Oh, Branch."

* * *

It was long after the race was over that the entire plot hatched and developed almost to finality was fully explained by Claiborne. Harley, a bullet in his shoulder, made a full confession in his hotel room. Hargreaves gave up the letters he had received from Harley further revealing the plan to frame the night race and then win with the faster ringer. Jones admitted duping Sullivan.

Hargreaves, Harley, threatened by the wrath of the town—Sheriff Ed Johnson was forced to deputize a dozen men to keep the vengeance-hungry crowd from storming the *Palace* hotel where they and Jones were held—paid off to the limit. Under an escort, they and Danny Jones left the town at midnight.

* * *

July fifth was bright, clear and hot over the slowly settling town—a sobering Sunday after tumult.

Early, Claiborne had his wound dressed in Dr. Smith's hotel room. "You saved the town, Branch," the doctor told his patient as the latter winced under the iodine, "but nobody'll give you credit. They were victims of their own gullibility and avarice. They want to forget. People are like that."

"I won the race, after a fashion—my last race," Claiborne said. "That's what counts."

The men heard the pound of a small fist on the wall, and then Barbara asked: "Is that you, Branch? Did I hear you say 'last race'?"

Claiborne chuckled. "That's what I said."

"Do you feel like riding?"

"We'll take a long ride," he answered through a wall that seemed to be there no longer, "on the range to the north—our range."

Webb Holliday had to do something about the senseless feud that had sprung up between his father and Ben Pearsall. And that meant doing something about the woman called Dagger —the woman those two old roosters were fighting over

THERE WAS enmity between Joe Holliday and Ben Pearsall, after forty years of friendship. A woman called Dagger caused it. Webb Holliday, old Joe's son, heard about it when he dragged up from the Segundo behind eighteen hundred head of heifers old Joe had bought. It was a two week drag; Webb lost weight, his bones ached, and when they told him about Dagger he wondered what got into the old fools.

"Who is she?" he asked, unsaddling a thinned-down horse that was as bone-weary as he was.

Slim Hall ran the Bradded H while Webb was away. "A tramp, if you ask me," he told Webb. "Purty—shore, she's purty enough! But young. Nearer your age than your pa's. Runs a store in Bull Lick, calls it a notions shop. But it's a husband she's huntin'—a husband and trouble. Well, she's still got the husband to pick. The other's here."

That's all Slim knew about it—except that he added Dagger was some kind of a foreigner, little and dark and well-rounded, with big brown eyes that said, fall in line.

"Where is the old fool?" Webb asked.

"Yore pa," Slim said carefully, "has went into Bull Lick. Hit's Sattiday night, his turn to court Dagger. She's got them two old hellions on rations, turn and turn about. On Wednesdays, Ben Pearsall goes to see her."

Webb went into the big, empty house. He couldn't remember a mother here; she had died when he was a shaver in diapers. He used to wonder why his lonely old pa didn't

WOMAN CALLED DAGGER

BY JOHN JO CARPENTER

Joe Holliday and Ben Pearsall were like two yellow-toothed range studs fighting over a young mare.

get married again. Instead, he had set his sights on money.

"Well, he got it, and foolishness in his sixties," Webb grumped.

At first he intended doing nothing, but when he went into the office to make a record of the Segundo transaction, and saw what a mess things were, he changed his mind.

Mrs. Casey, cook and housekeeper in the Big House, gave him more details. Her cooking was terrible and she wasn't neat in her housekeeping, and she boozed a little. But they were used to her, as a man gets used to a pet bunion.

"Business? Old Joe don't worry about business no more," she told Webb. "He's took to packin' a gun ag'in. And drinkin'. Got drunk two-three days ago and let it out he aimed to kill Ben Pearsall if he showed up around that Dagger-woman's house."

"In two weeks he got that crazy?" Webb asked, disbelieving.

When he saw the state of the records, he understood. They had been shipping almost daily while he was away, according to Slim. But where were the shipping slips, the tally-book figures, to show for it? Who got how many beeves, and when? The desk was a jumble. Old Joe's mind hadn't been on business.

Impatient anger laid hold of Webb. He had put on moccasins to be comfortable, but he shoved tired feet down into boots again, caught a fresh horse, and slanted up the nine miles into Bull Lick, where the railroad ran.

Joe Holliday and Ben Pearsall came to Montana together, crashing up through the Big Horn country when it was said no less than a company of troopers could get through safely.

They got through. They had stakes down when Custer was killed; they said, I told you so, and went on the way they had been. They carved the Bradded H out of nothing, and had wealth and safety when the United States at last decided it was a safe country for their soldiers.

Fifteen years ago the railroad came through, and Ben Pearsall saw civilization coming, and hankered to share it. He sold out his share of the Bradded H to Joe, and started the Bull Lick Bank of Commerce. There were no papers to sign; the two just shook hands, and it was a deal.

That's the kind of friendship a woman called Dagger had broken in two weeks.

"I could understand it in Ben," Webb said to himself, seeing the lamps of the town come into sight. "He was always an old batch, woman-shy but willin'. Pa ought to know better."

HE TIED on front of the *Git There* saloon and went in. It was getting cold outside, and half the loafers in Bull Lick had gathered around the big sheet-iron stove.

Nobody had much to say past howdy. That was a sign to Webb; there ought to be a lot of talk about how was things down toward Segundo, and so forth. He shifted his gun back so he could lean against the bar comfortably, and had his silent drink.

"Anybody seen Pa?" he asked.

Bill Farr, who owned the *Git There* picked his words careful. "Now that you ask," he said, making it clear he wasn't volunteering to butt in, "your pa was in here less than an hour ago. Want to hear more?"

"Yes."

"Now that you ask, he was all ironed up and lookin' for Ben Pearsall. Seems Ben declared a truce off and went up to see Dagger Kratka tonight, your pa's night. Ever see two old yellow-tooth range studs fight over a young mare?"

"Yes," Webb said. "No sense, no glory, nothin' but cut and chop and kick and bite and scream until one's dead."

"Exactly how it is. Your pa's passin' the word. Dagger, scared of trouble likely, chased Ben out tonight and then locked the door ag'in your pa. Now you've asked, Webb, that's it. But I know a lot of people would hate to see them

two old fools shoot it out. They're both well-liked."

"Where's she live?"

"Dagger Kratka? In the Munn house."

"So that's her name!"

The door opened and a short, plump man with blazing red cheeks, blazing blue eyes, and tufts of white hair peeping from under his big hat, stamped inside. He wore a blue business suit, but over it was buckled old holsters that sagged with a heavy pair of forty-fives.

Years and years ago, when Webb, now nearly thirty, was a kid of twelve or thirteen, old Ben Pearsall had hung up those guns. Ashamed of his reputation with them, he hid them away. Time was, Ben had lost sleep over a man he had shot. Now, close to seventy, there was something funny about those guns around his round belly.

Webb smiled at him. "Howdy, Ben. How come you're all armed up like a new battleship?"

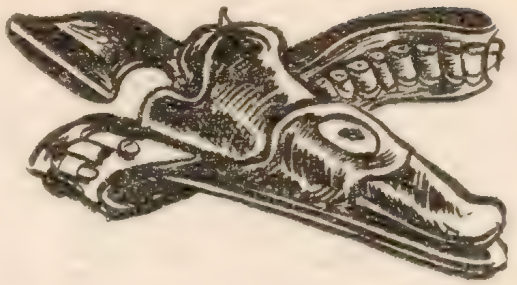
Old Ben's ruddy face swivelled around toward Webb. "Where's your pa?" he barked.

Webb shrugged: "Pa's sixty-eight, old enough to take care of himself, I thought. Ben, I said howdy. Is that the answer I get? What trouble did you and me ever have?"

"None, I guess." Old Ben softened briefly. "I hold you no grudge, Webb, but your pa's in town and passin' the word. It ain't a big town, and it's my town, and he knows he don't have to go from door to door, leavin' word I'm to meet him. If you see him, tell him to sneak out of town or I call his bluff."

Hitching at his pants, Webb crossed the room swiftly and looked down at old Ben. He was build like his dad, tall and rangy and a little slow-looking.

"If I see him," he said, deliberately loud and slow, "I'll tell him same as I'll tell you—if either one of you old fools pull a gun on each other, I'll bang your heads together good. You damned old idiot, Ben, what do you and Pa want to fight over a tramp less than half your ages for?"



BEN WENT white, made a strangled sound, and fell back against the wall as Webb drove his shoulder into him. Webb had been waiting for it. He knew how Ben went for a gun, knew he'd be a lot slower than he used to be.

He twisted, not bothering to grab for old Ben's arms, and slammed the shorter, older man into the wall with his shoulder. It knocked the wind out of Ben but it left the same fire glinting in the blazing blue eyes.

Webb knew then that it wasn't any use. He might as well go home and have his sleep. He might as well let nature take its course.

"Don't try it, Ben," he warned, seeing the old man hesitate over his guns. "I remember your years, but only so far. Now—behave!"

He passed Bill Farr, behind the bar, a look that said, *Try to keep the old fool here while I locate my old man.* He went out, leaving Ben Pearsall in the *Git There,* and located his old man down at the livery stable.

If Ben Pearsall was crazy, old Joe was crazier. He was a stooped old giant of a man, still nearly six foot three, with a mane of unruly iron-gray hair and a big-featured, seamed face. He had never been Ben Pearsall's equal with a gun, and he knew it, but he had one on tonight.

He was just coming out of the stable when Webb came up and put a hand on his chest and said, "Back inside. I want to talk to you."

Joe never dreamed Webb would try to dictate to him about the woman, Dagger. He thought it was something about cattle or business. "I ain't got much time, Webb. Cain't it wait?"

"Sure it can wait, Pa," Webb said,

"but it won't. Give me that gun. You damned old idiot, Ben Pearsall will sprinkle you so full of lead you'd sink in a salt lake. Here—before you hurt yourself."

It was the wrong thing to say; it ridiculed the old man, whipped him where he was tender. When Webb reached for the gun, old Joe struck out with his fist. He had an old arm, but he could still do his day's work, and didn't have to call a hired hand to do his lifting.

Webb went back against the wall, and his knees buckled. The lights went out for a minute. Next thing he knew, his father was leaning down, shoving his black, angry face into Webb's.

"You try anything like that again," the old man was panting, "and I'll forget you're my own get, and it won't be with my fist."

He was outside the door, on the prowl for Ben Pearsall and coming closer to him, by the time Webb got his mind and legs back.

He went after the old man from behind. He jumped, caught old Joe by the shoulders, with his knee in the small of the old man's back. His left foot went down, his left spur hooked around Joe's left shin.

THEY WENT down together, and Webb got his hands on old Joe's gun and threw it as far as he could. Old Joe was crazy mad and nearly crying, but he was an in-fighter by nature; he had whipped a lot of men in his time, and the right thing came as second nature.

Webb was dog-tired, saddle-stiff, weighted down with unwillingness to hit his own father. He tried to keep old Joe pinned down by weight alone, and was grateful when Jake Lewis, who ran the livery stable, came out with a lantern. Jake, like everyone in Bull Lick, liked both old men, hated to see trouble.

But weight wouldn't hold old Joe. He got his hand on Webb's gun. Webb got hold of Joe's wrist with both hands, twisted, doubled the old man back and made him let go. Jake Lewis butted in, a risky thing that made Webb grateful. Jake took possession of the gun.

Joe got his heels back and Webb took a long spur-raking, hearing his shirt tear up the side, feeling the hot rowels tear into his flesh. Old Joe had been forty-two when Webb was born; he was seventy-one now, but a born dirty fighter, the kind who fought to live, and not necessarily by rules. His tricks wiped out the forty-two years difference in the ages of father and son. Webb realized this just in time.

Joe had his heels in Webb's belly when Webb understood it couldn't be the way he wanted it to be. The old man was going to kick him back, come up in the same motion, and jump. They used to fight that way in the old days, Webb remembered hearing Joe say.

Webb rocked forward, upending on top of his father just as old Joe kicked out. He came down almost head first, cocking his right and smashing down with it, seeing the hate-filled eyes of a stranger instead of his dad's. They'd be a long time getting over this. Never would, probably. Bull Lick wasn't his home any more, nor the Bradded H, after this.

But no matter how it ended things, it ended them. He caught old Joe under the ear. Webb had taken a lot of punishment in a short time. He was bleeding badly from the spur-cut and he ached all over, but as he stood up he knew his father would be shooting it out with no one that night.

Old Joe lay there like a felled pine, a big, broken giant of a man, never licked except by his own son, and then after he spanned his allotted three-score-and-ten. Hoofs sounded, and horses ringed the space in front of the livery stable, and Webb looked up and saw six Bradded H riders.

"Miz Casey said you went to town," Slim Hall said, "and we reckoned mebbe you might need help."

"Take him home, Slim."

Slim hesitated. He dreaded trying to handle old Joe when he came out of this sleep.

"Won't do no good. You don't understand, Webb. It may be funny

to you, two old-timers like these'ns fightin' over a woman. It ain't funny to them. This'll only make it worse. Now they'll figger they have to finish what they started. You done the wrong thing."

Webb knew that, too, but it was too late now. The fact that a thing didn't make good sense didn't keep the thing from being.

"Take him home," he repeated. "If he starts something, brain him. But he won't. He knows by now this ain't the night, and the old man could always wait to get in his lick."

That was what worried him. That was the second thought, the afterthought he should have taken a long time ago. Slim would have no trouble getting Joe Holliday home. The trouble would come later, when Joe set out to finish what he started.

He helped prop his father up on his horse. The old man was beginning to wake up as Slim headed back toward the Bradded H. A cold moon was shining; Webb could see his father's face all too clearly. There would be purple bruised areas, big ones, in a few hours.

Slim himself rode beside the old man, holding him up, while another led the horse. Crazy, childish over a woman, brusied and beaten he might be, but old Joe Holliday had his friends and followers. Slim and the boys were on Joe's side now. They didn't like Webb's way of handling it. They might hold Joe wrong, but they'd stay with him loyally.

WEBB WATCHED them out of sight, went back to the *Git There* just as old Ben Pearsall came charging out. Gossip travelled fast in Bull Lick; there was always someone eager to bring trouble to a head, to have something to watch. There had been a fight between Old Man Holliday and his son, and Ben had heard about it.

Old Ben had both guns out. He rammed them into Webb's belly and froze there with his arms quivering, his face a grotesque mask of rage. Webb lifted his hands slowly, wondering how crazy the old fool was.

"You butted in for the last time," Ben said thickly. He began cursing, a long string of disconnected blasphemies that seemed to half choke him.

Webb stood there with his hands up, hoping the old man's cursing would clear his head a little. It seemed to at last. Ben stepped back and slid the guns back into their holsters.

"You butted in for the last time," he repeated, more calmly. "Webb, if you interfere with me, or between me and old Joe again, I'll kill you. You know I can and you know I will."

Webb shook his head wonderingly and lowered his arms. "Sense enough to run a bank but not enough to run yourself!" he marvelled. "Well, maybe I'll come to it, when I'm old and worn out and brainless, too. Maybe we all do."

He took a step closer.

"You can go home, Ben. The old man's out of town. I give you my word I'll never say another word to you or to him. I made my try and it seems it didn't work. Once is all I owe either of you—one common-sense try, and now to hell with both of you.

"Next time you meet, shoot and be damned! I hope you kill each other. I hope you make a laughing-stock of yourselves that will make your names merriment as long as you're both remembered. I hope they cut a broken heart on your tombstones, and bury you together, as a warning to what men can come to in their second childhood."

He would have said more, but it wasn't doing any good. He was stating a case for good sense, but those two had left good sense behind a long time ago.

He got up on his horse, to go back to the Bradded H and try the same words on his father, to see how they fit. Next came a long ride to nowhere, and it made him sick at his stomach to think how things would go when he was gone. Well, they'd go the same way if he stayed, and it wasn't something he wanted to watch.

He saw old Ben Pearsall head back toward the big yellow house where he lived—the biggest house in town, as became the President of the Bull Lick Bank of Commerce—the big yellow house where he had planned, still planned, to install a woman called Dagger as his wife.

Nothing more would happen tonight. You could separate two old range bulls, two old range studs, for a time. They would meet and fight again, if they were fated to fight, but nothing more would happen tonight.

Coyotes were shrilling in the hills as he let his horse pick its own gait up the street, heading for home, dreading it because it wasn't really home any more. Two weeks of pushing eighteen hundred cows as hard as they could stand to be pushed, and then this.

LEAVING TOWN Webb saw a light twinkling in a small, neat house to his right, just off the road. It was a bright light, from a big lamp, lit by someone who liked things gay and bright. The Munn house was white and cheerful-looking by day; the woman called Dagger contrived somehow to keep it that way at night.

He cursed her, started to ride on, and then pulled the horse around and jabbed it toward the light. There was a fence around the place, and a flagstone sidewalk, and curtains at the window—lots of things the Munns hadn't bothered with. The woman had made a lot of changes in two weeks.

He knocked.

She wasn't pretty at first glance. He had to take that long, second look to realize what a claim she could make on a man, how she could get into his blood. His own blood began pounding as he looked at her.

Short, with small wrists and ankles and waist, but with a firm, womanly roundness. A mass of brown, curly hair, a tawny skin, deep black eyes that hid things, a big mouth with mobile, heavy lips. Foreign-looking, wise, self-sufficient; this woman knew her powers and used them deliberately.

"Well?" she said, unafraid, as he stood there sizing her up. Another woman might have screamed, to have a strange man pound on her door; the one called Dagger never saw the man who could make her afraid.

"I'm Webb Holliday," he said, keeping it short. "I want to talk to you. I'll come in, if you don't mind."

"And if I do?" Her voice was husky, tinged with an accent that somehow had excitement in it.

"I'll come in anyway."

He went in. She did not make a fuss. She was not afraid to face down the son of Joe Holliday. She closed the door and stood looking up at him, perfectly at ease.

And somehow he felt that they understood each other, that he didn't need to beat around the bush with her.

"They call you Dagger. What's your real name?"

"Dagmar. The other stuck to me somehow."

"I can understand that." He blinked and came to the point. "How much?"

"How much for what?"

"To leave town, and let two old men die with their boots on, honorably, and not with everybody laughing at them. You and I speak the same language, Dagger. I'll make it brief. I can lay hands on ten thousand dollars tomorrow morning—cash. Not a cent more that quickly. Is it enough? There's a night train to Billings. I'll meet you there tomorrow afternoon, with ten thousand. My word's good."

She shook her head. Anger flared up in him, and something else with it.

"You think money is it?" She tossed the mop of brown curls. "You think that's all it is? You're plain-speaking—so am I. You don't think a woman could deliberately seek a husband and be a good wife, do you? But she can. At least—I can.

"It's not the money. I—I've got a little girl in Billings. I've done my best to care for her. But it's not a woman's country. I want a home. I'll earn one, deserve one."

She was getting angry, too. Again she tossed her hair.

"You think I wanted them to fight? You think a woman like me wants old men quarreling over her?"

"No," he said, "I guess not."

He pulled back his hand, remembering what a fool she had made of his father, desiring to hit her as he had never desired to hit anyone.

The uselessness of it made Webb's hand fall limp. He had hit his dad; what did that accomplish? Only more trouble, instead of less. He pulled his hat down on his head went to the door.

"The one that's left, if there is

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one left," he said, a final warning, "won't be the husband you were looking for. He'll be old and broken, a laughing-stock and sick of his bargain. You could do more for that child with the money, Dagger."

"Don't call me that!"

She slapped him, a ringing blow over the ear and cheek, one that hurt. He seized her small wrists as they stood in the open door, wondering where she got the strength to make his face ache that way.

Everyone called her Dagger. Yet she slapped him for using the name. Why?

He let go of her, saying, "I guess you meant well. It's nature's fault, not yours—the nature of two men who should have better sense. One of those deals where everybody loses. It's your kid I feel sorry for."

He went back to his horse, wondering because her child bothered him. Yes, the kid would be the real loser. And the Bradded H, which would fall to pieces without a Holliday to run it. And the Bank of Commerce, because Ben couldn't come out of this with the nerve and brains and reputation it took to steer a bank.

WEBB WAS a hundred yards up the road when he turned the horse and went back. This wouldn't take long, either way. He did not bother to dismount, but rode the horse through the little gate and right up to her door.

She either heard the hoofs on the flagstones—or was waiting. She opened the door and looked at him. Her name might be Dagger, but she was dulled now, and scared; if she had ever enjoyed men fighting over her, that time was past.

"There's another way," he said, a little thickly. "We could make that night train together. You and I. What would they have to fight about then?"

Her eyes narrowed. Her full lips tightened into a thin line. She shook her head.

"No, thanks! I suppose you feel noble, doing that to save trouble, but count me out. I didn't start it, I don't owe them or you or this town that much."

"I give you my word, Dagger, it's not that."

"Then what is it?"

He reached down and caught her tiny wrist again, sliding out of the saddle at the same time. She tried to hit him. He blocked her hand with his elbow. She made a sound, half snarl, half sob, and grabbed at his gun. He caught her other wrist and pushed her back against the wall.

He was smiling now. He was fighting the right person.

"You know what it is, Dagger. Get your suitcase packed while I get Bill Farr. He's the justice of the peace here. We've got about an hour before that train's due. Or do I have to drag you?"

He had to drag her. She fought until he got her to the gate—fought silently, like a wildcat, scratching and kicking and swinging fists that could hurt like a man's.

By then she knew he wasn't doing it just to save trouble between two old men. By then she knew Webb was the kind who could make up his mind in a hurry, bet everything on the card he picked. By then she knew he had no fear of sharp edges; daggers didn't scare him.

"I hoped it would be this way," Bill Farr said, after he married them, as he walked down to the station where they waited for the train. "But it'll be rough on you, losin' the Bradded H."

"I'll be back," Webb said, confidently.

And he would. He was dead sure of it; two weeks had been enough to cause the trouble, another two weeks and it would be over. His dad was old, and Ben Pearsall was old. He'd be back, with Dagger and the child, and the two old men would have to like it.

They had tamed the country, those two, but they were old. Webb was young, and there was a law of life that said how such things were to end. That law was on his side; a woman called Dagger was proof of it. Webb was no longer tired, no longer worried, as he waited for the train with Dagger's small hand lying soft and warm and trusting in his.

Joe saw the tomahawk coming . . . too late

SAFE in BOOTHILL

by William O'Sullivan

Joe Hawes could choose between slow death and fast death, but there seemed nothing else for him. But, even so, his duty came first, and the mails he carried had to be protected, made ready for someone else to take on.

THE ROUTE was new but the hills were old and high; not even the infrequent stagecoaches could high-wheel it through these snows.

The wounded man lay in the drifts where howling winds packed the snow, and listened to the wind-borne cries of Indians who searched for him along the shelf of road below the peak.

He smiled grimly, the facial spasm of it cracking the ice-crusted beard on his young face. "My safety is also my grave," he saw it clearly; "unless they give up the hunt soon, I'll freeze. I won't be able to get to the cave."

He pillowed his head upright somewhat, against the burden he had removed from the pony before he had forced the brute off the cliff below, where the raiders from Pyramid Lake were now reading sign and trying to figure where he had got to.

But his thoughts ever slipped back to Dave Cready, the rider who was to take the Pony Express mail from Virginia City on east on the run toward Salt Lake City.

Dave will know, when I don't show up, he thought. *He will know, and he will come look in the cave, just as we worked it out together what we'd do if we either of us got*

attacked and had to hide out for weather, or until help came, or until our hurts let us go on, if we got any.

There was no chance of any man reading sign to his retreat; his only hope was Dave Cready, the rider who would take the important dispatches on from Virginia City. Or who now might never take along either the dispatches or the gold dust that Carson City was shipping east by him, when the weather-shielded raiders had struck.

What saved him would also prevent any casual passer-by from casting a knowing eye on his tracks and reading distress in them. No one would follow the wind-bared shoulder of gravel and rock where he'd scrambled his pony up before coaxing the faithful little beast off the cliff, crashing far, far below to its death.

"It was fast," Rider Joe Hawes consoled himself for the necessity of the act. "Which it won't be if these Piutes get hold of me; it was a choice of the hoss or the mail, and I did as I would have done had it been me or the mail. The mail has to go through. The Union has to know how the West beyond the Rockies stands, in these troublesome times of the Sixties."

He cast his mind back along the way it had gone:

* * *

THE PIUTES had suddenly materialized out of the swirling snows along the tricky trail. Muffled in blankets and with shawls pulled close over their ears, Joe hadn't known were they friend or foe until he heard that guttural cry and saw the tomahawk coming at him through the thick-falling flakes.

Moving instinctively, his spurs roweling his mount in a jump to one side, Joe had fired his hand-gun and had fired again, thanking in his mind the Yankee ingenuity which had perfected a small gun capable of being re-fired without also re-loading.

The tomahawk had slid from the dead hand of his attacker, but not before it struck Joe stunningly on the head, all but knocking him out of the saddle. Blood streamed from his scalp wound, and he struck out into the blanket of steadily falling snow, his pony going in frantic bounds to escape the raking spurs that Joe drove home of necessity.

He was aware from his forward tilt in the saddle that he was going down-grade, knew that he had turned back on his trail. Blood was caking on his neck, but the flow of it was fast and full from the wound. Grimly, Joe forced the pony back, exclaiming in satisfaction when the quickly-filling hoof-marks of his up-trail journey told him he had blundered back onto the path.

Carson City was too far to risk trying, at the rate he was losing blood. Virginia City was up-grade all the way, but the pony could pick its way in quicker time than a headlong race into the snow downgrade would bring him to help, even if by some miracle he held to the route.

He'd passed the warm cloud of steam that marked the telltale hot spring which was his guide along the snow-blanketed path up the mountain and to Virginia City, on the east slope. He was content the flow of blood was slacking, and everything was all right, when he came into the searching band of Indians again.

But he had anticipated this when he had turned back. He was ready for them, and thus had the jump on the savages.

His carbine smacked flatly into the faces of the raiders in the forefront, sending them scattering with cries of pain and anger. But another raider blundered at a fast gallop into him; Joe's carbine was knocked from his hand by the force of the collision. Before he could get his hand-gun up and working, the almost-unhorsed attacker had gone for his knife and plunged.

The burn of steel told him the thrust had struck hard and close to his heart; only the heavily-wadded clothing he wore spared his life for another escape from the band...

Joe gave up thought of precipitate flight, now, holding a hand to his chest in an effort to slow the blood;

he urged the pony along with his knees.

He leaned forward in the saddle against the up-grade and to assure holding his seat as he weakened, which he surely must.

On and up, the pony walked briskly and sure-footedly, throwing its head in alarm as it trod perilously close to the gray-white space below and to the left that marked where snow still fell...and thus marked clear space down. Far down...

The cries of the thwarted marauders came closer, and Joe grimly forced his mount now right a dozen paces, now left exactly a dozen. Exactly a dozen, and no more, for the destruction of the far rocks awaited him on that side.

Closer and closer came the cries of the pursuers, but Joe held grimly to his zig-zag trail, knowing the others were following it without realizing what it was he was doing. Joe twisted his head to watch back of him; when he saw the wall of snow solidify, he straightened his pony on its course, said a silent prayer as he pricked the beast with his spurs and jumped it far to the right and then ahead.

A muffled form showed briefly in the blanket of white behind him. Joe held his hand-gun at ready in case the Piute, following the trail of hoof-marks with bent head, should look up. The sounds of pursuit fell away, then, and Joe knew the braves were huddled in indecision, an indecision made greater by the very numbers of them. A man alone made his plans and took his chances; he had the answer quickly, one way or another. Men in groups, without a leader, paused, consulted, argued.

Sure in his mind that one of the raiders whom he had felled was the leader of this now indecisive band, Joe plunged recklessly on. Better be at the bottom of the canyon dead, than alive and in their hands."

ON AND ON, higher and still higher. The pony now shied away from the left, and Joe knew he was at the turn half-way up the shelf to Virginia City that clung to the mountain on the east slope. He keened his eyes for the dip of unprotected spur that should show. When it didn't materialize, he felt his heart sink. Joe had thought he knew where he was; he couldn't go on much longer. Even now, the very effort of sitting his saddle was further weakening him. The wind, then, started to tear at his spent breath, and he felt the tension flow out of him as he worked his brain for just one more plan. Just one more plan!

When I come to the clearing that should be close by, I'll turn th' hoss in an' make my way around the south side to the cave Dave and I found.

But even when the outcropping of rock showed bare, he knew the horse would have to go. The horse would have to go along the snow-packed trail and over the edge and down. The horse would have to go so that the pursuers would pause, puzzle it, and maybe take the bait and leave. Or...

He wouldn't let his mind dwell on consequences. Joe started to send the mount over immediately, as soon as he could slide out of saddle, loosen the saddle-girth, and make his way as fast as he could to hiding. But he realized his waning strength was not equal to the task.

He spurred the horse swiftly over the wind-swept trace to its hump, slid to the ground, leaned against the mount while he loosed the saddle. Mounted again, he went as far as the first snow drift that peaked high on the lee of the wind there. He leaned over, used his waning strength to jettison the gear from him, the life's blood of the Pony Express rider, and grunted his first satisfaction when he saw the equipment crest the drift and fall away into nothingness.

Hurriedly, Joe roweled the horse back over the snowless trace to the edge of the trail. Here, he backtracked, made a fresh trail in return, and slid off the horse on the rock side of the path. It was easy to slap the pony ahead; and then shove its rump hard.

The pony neighed its terror as it lost its footing. Joe added his own

shouts of alarm and of grief for the horse to it, and then stumbled back over the trace to the drift. Gathering his waning reserves, he hurled himself in a headlong dive over the drift, taking the shock of his rough landing stoically, praying only that one of his boots hadn't dragged a telltale in the otherwise untracked snow.

He didn't realize the fall had knocked him unconscious until he came to and was stirring; and then heard the voices. He lay very still, then, trying to read what was in the minds of the Indians.

They'd be paused by the hoof-marks where the pony had gone over. They'd be going ahead to be sure he hadn't tried to make it that way afoot. They'd be coming back again, considering things, studying the bare rock-trace with keen eyes.

"Here they come!" he whispered. "Here—they—come!"

He lay very still, listening to the guttural and incomprehensible, to him, comments of the searching savages. But he could estimate what they were saying: "He came this way. See! See the hoof-marks, the disturbed gravel?"

Another: "No-o. Here go the hoofs back again. To the trail. He came this way hoping to escape. He saw there was no escape here. The snow beyond would tell us. So he raced back for the trail. His pony slipped."

"Yes, it is trúly said! Recall, we heard the horse scream, and then the pale-face shout? Come. We return. Possibly we can come upon him in the canyon, if the snows haven't buried horse and rider."

"Well, perhaps. But let us pause here and listen."

After a breathless space of time, Joe heard them going away. He was so numb he knew he would have to get into motion or else he would make his grave there where he was. But he waited, and was glad he did. A voice, so close above him that Joe all but gasped his surprise, spoke. Impatiently. A monosyllabic grunt answered. Joe lay very still. He lay still until he no longer had any choice but to die...

He rolled clear of his grave of snow. The fall of the flakes was abating. The wind was dying down. He was free for the moment of immediate danger.

But beyond, now, lay the task of getting to the cave before he froze to death. He was very weak when he made the rope that he wore about his padded waist, fast about his gear. He tried three times before he crested the snow-drift.

HE STRUGGLED, gasping and weak from the effort, to get his gear into the back of the cave. He stopped half way there, his eyes peering at something on the rough floor of the ground-warm shelter. Marks of a recent fire.

Someone had been there!

Dave? he wondered. *But no, I haven't been gone long enough. I was only a few hours late when the Piutes jumped me.*

Another thing suggested itself, then. Maybe Dave Cready was transferred to another part of the newly-opened run? Maybe Dave had come there to shelter in this storm, unable to get through to Carson City, and had gone back to Virginia City again?

Dave said if he got transferred, he would leave our map of the diggings we are going to work together, some day, hidden here. A copy of it, in case something happens to him.

The Pony Express riders were adventurous souls, banded together in a hazardous undertaking to get the mails through the wild country until such time as the telegraph lines were up, instead of terminating at St. Joe, in Missouri, and at Sacramento, in California. Many of the men—like Joe and Dave—were pardners who answered the call of Russell, Majors & Waddell to the dangerous and patriotic duty of keeping open vital lines of communication from east to west in these perilous times of American empire.

Foreign aggression, as well as internal strife, threatened.

Joe and Dave had answered the call, among others. And like others, they were prospecting for gold at the time, and no secret is more closely guarded than where one or another man thinks he has stumbled upon a likely strike. As had Dave Cready.

Joe secreted his gear as best he could—his sacred dispatches, and his valuable gold dust—in the rear of the cave. He got his Lucifers out of the small metal case he carried them in, and spent three of the matches in satisfying himself Dave had left no map, if he had been there.

He returned to the entrance to the cave, lodging himself behind a jut of rock on the inside of the cavern. From there he could watch without being detected. From there, he could be near to open air; he could watch his gear where he had dragged it through the cave to hiding in the gloom.

Joe got his small bag of supplies before he left the hiding place of his gear, to take with him. He saw the fire that had been burned recently had used up the wood-supply he and Dave had stored there, and he didn't feel up to searching the snows for wood to dry and fire so that he could know the strengthening warmth of strong chickory coffee. Anyway, he didn't want to risk a telltale of smoke just yet. Dave would come looking for him without it. Others who were not so welcome nor so interested in his welfare might come looking for him if he lighted a fire, and the smoke showed.

He chewed laboriously on his hard-tack squares, the pain of his head stabbing through him with each movement of his jaws. But he had to live, so he had to stoke the fires of his system as best he could. Later, he crawled to the mouth of the cave and scooped snow up in his hands to quench his burning thirst.

He knew his wounds had drained the essential salts in his lost blood from his system, adding to his thirst. He made a mental note to pack salt in his gear, when he got back again. If he got back again.

He didn't know how long he had been since the Indian attack. Hours, anyway. Maybe many hours. He saw the glow of the sun in the west while he couldn't see the sun because of the rocky tors that hemmed in the mouth of the cave. Nor could he see the east for the same reason. The yawning canyon to the south was snow-veiled.

He huddled his knees up under his chin and fell off into a drowsy coma, aware that a mounting fever was on him.

WHEN HE awoke, it was pitch black. But Joe knew he wasn't alone in the cave. He tried to sniff the air to detect if it were a human or a four-legged creature that he sensed was sharing his shelter.

The blood had caked in his nostrils, and he had to breathe through his mouth. He felt for his hand-gun, wondering if his nasal obstruction of caked blood had caused him to snore in his sleep; or if he had slept the sleep of exhaustion, silently, motionlessly.

"Does that *thing*, whatever it is, know I'm here, too?"

The cold was in his bones despite the warmth of the cave. The earth retains an even internal heat throughout the external seasons. But from fever, Joe had gone to chills. He tried to clamp his teeth shut against the chattering of them, and finally found it better to slack his jaws open. That way, the Thing would not hear him, if it had not already heard him. Whatever The Thing was...

Minutes that were eons, hours that were eternity, passed somewhere beyond, perhaps, but in the cave where Joe was, it was always the present for him. The grim, unknown, threatening present.

He lay in the dark trying impossibly to p e n e t r a t e the v e i l of mystery, but drawing consolation from the thought that if he couldn't see The Thing, neither could The Thing see him. Unless it were an animal that could see in the dark.

An owl? A mountain-cat, maybe?

Joe closed his hand about his gun and brought it closer to him.

He didn't know when he first noticed the gray that streaked the cave. But suddenly, it was there. The dark of it lightened, grew clearer, and soon he could discern the outlines of the rock behind which he lay half-slumped against the wall of the cave.

A movement close by startled him into feral attention. He caught a suggestion of something out of the corner of his eye. It took shape. The shape of a man, a sleeping man, a blanket drawn up over his shoulders.

The shape was quite close. Ten feet away, perhaps. Perhaps less. In the growing light, Joe could make out features. Rough, beard-stubbled features. The man's hat had fallen back off his head in his sleep. It was nobody Joe recognized.

Joe had weighed the possibilities through the long eternity of the night, after he'd been certain he was not alone.

Even if it is Dave, he thought, *I must be careful not to alarm him. He might come up shooting...*

Now that he saw it wasn't Dave, other possibilities were presented.

Maybe it was Dave's substitute? Dave might be sick, hurt. Or transferred. It wouldn't do to alarm him in this case, either, unless the stranger already knew Joe was there, was sleeping until he or Joe should awake in daylight.

JOE'S THOUGHTS were on something else, on another possibility: Not all the bad men of the West were Indians by any remote figuring. The red-man had been basically a good man, though savage, until the coming of the pale-faces with their ruining civilization for all things wild. Even the Indians who had attacked Joe the day before—or was it two or three days before, how could he tell?—had their just complaints, albeit their way of voicing them was not disposing the pale-faces to impartial consideration of their claims.

The Indian had been exploited by the fur-trappers, had been abused by the violation of treaty after treaty that took away their land and their buffalo and sent them roving far from their loved hunting-grounds. But the buffalo, like the engineer, followed the lowest line of resistance across the country, and when the railroads came—and come they had to, and were pushing on now—the buffalo had to go. And after them, the Indians...

There were men far more brutal and savage than the resentful Indian in the West. Men who followed after working-men as hawks follow after their prey. Road-agents, escaped criminals, pathological murderers. It could be one of these who now slept so close beside Joe.

But whoever or whatever, Joe didn't want him close to him when the stranger awoke. The Pony Express rider cast about in his mind for an idea that would effect his purpose.

A stone?

But there were no small rocks, no stones, near.

Just anything to throw, so I can attract his attention elsewhere. Whoever it is may be the one who lighted our firewood I found burned here. Whoever it is may have seen part of the fight I had with the Piutes, maybe. Though with the snow falling, that isn't likely. It could even be some hanger-on who heard I was missing, and came like a vulture to find me and my gold before the proper authorities could get on my track.

But whoever, the importance of identification, if friend—or foe posing as friend—was as dire as draw-

ing the next breath, for the wounded man. For the next breath might bring a choking cough, and sudden death, instead of continued life.

And as well as Life, there was Joe's sacred trust, the dispatches, and the gold that was cached in the rear of the cave. Nor could Joe wait long to identify the stranger, because he had no knowledge how ill he was, how long or short his time would be.

He thought, then, of the small derringer he carried in the belt-band of his levis. With a grim smile, he got it out, palmed it to him, drew his hand back, his eyes watching the face of the stranger sleeping so close by. He cast it hard from him, hard and aimed for the back of the cave, where it fell away into the gloom.

The derrigner landed with a clatter. Joe was watching the stranger for his reactions. If he expected a sudden surging up of the man's body in alarm, he was disappointed. The man's eyes came open, full on the corner where Joe lay; but they were *listening* eyes rather than seeing eyes.

After a long moment, the man came silently erect, shedding his blanket, gathering his booted feet under him cautiously, his eyes going truly to just where the derringer, the small pistol, had landed. After another long moment, the stranger drew out a long-barreled single-action gun and sat straight to watch the dark recess where the noise had originated.

"That you...Hawes?"

Joe almost shouted his relief; but he clamped down on his breathing the next moment when the stranger challenged the dark with some Indian dialect.

Maybe a renegade white man, he thought. *Maybe that's how the Injuns got onto me. Were set onto me!*

Then he was in perplexity again when he realized that a lot of the settlers spoke some Indian language. This, however, that the man had flung in challenge at the dark of the cave, had sounded fluent, practised.

How to identify him? Joe mused. *How to be sure he doesn't get me, and then my pouch!*

He waited, knowing the other had to make a move, soon or late. When he got to his feet with cat-litheness, Joe saw the bundle of dry faggots that had been out of sight at the man's side, and he guessed his intent readily. He'd light a fire, torch the place into the light of day.

THE MAN crouched with his back to Joe, his eyes ever going to the dark recess and back to his task. He worked skillfully with his sticks, then, rubbing them patiently and artfully, ever and again plunging them into the small mound of shavings he had made with his hunting-knife.

At last a wreath of smoke lived. The stranger fanned it to going, fed it dry twigs, fed it the faggots. Then he stood and tossed a faggot into the rear of the cave, his hand at ready with his gun. Another and another faggot, he threw. Then with a grunt of impatience, he came erect to make his way stealthily. When he was perhaps half-way between Joe and his rider-gear, the wounded man stopped him with his voice.

"Whoa, up! Hold it right there,

pardner. No, no! Just holster the gun. That's it, pardner. Now, with your right hand in the air, unbuckle your holster-belt."

"Listen, Hawes, it's me. Saffron! I know your voice, Hawes. I'm here to save you, man. Where are you?"

"Never mind that right now, Saffron—is it? I don't recollect the name, friend. But maybe so it is all right. But for now—kick that gun belt away. That's it. Now back up and sit down. Right there. That's it. All right, Saffron. Talk."

The man laughed. "Damned if you ain't like an Indian."

"Return the compliment," Joe observed mildly. "Never saw a squaw make a neater fire with rubbing sticks together."

"Been out here a long time, Hawes. Listen, we thought you were a goner."

"How'd you know to look here for me?"

"Dave's been transferred, and—"

"Oh. He told you about this cave?" Joe bit his lip in vexation. But it was out, and he couldn't detect any change in the expression of the man facing him, his dark eyes liquid in the light of the fire from the faggots. "When?"

"He got transferred. He told me then."

Joe thought about that. It could be. It could have been why Dave didn't trust the map of their mine location to be left there, to be found. Dave could have thought of a better place to leave the map for him. A friend, maybe.

"When'd you get here?"

"Sundown. Listen, this is a helluva way to greet yore new pardner on th' run! Shucks! I came along at sundown, and bedded in. Looked like yore hoss had gone over the side."

Joe thought about that. "D'you look for me there, where the pony is?"

Saffron's question was reasonable. "Where is that? All I know is where the hoof-prints showed he went over. So I came here. And now you hold me up and—"

"Just got to be sure, that's all. How long you been on the run?"

"Just three days agone."

"Mattock put you on?"

Saffron stared, then grinned. "You got a fever? Mattock has been dead two weeks now. Drygulched up near Reno. You didn't know that? Peters is the acting-Supe for Mattock. Listen, where is the pouch? What's wrong with you? Why don't you come out of that nook you are in? Hurt?"

"What makes you think that?" Joe asked easily. He wondered—had his torturous way here not left blood pools along the trace, if how he dragged his gear after him hadn't been evident? Or...if the snow had drifted to cover his tracks. Or—

Is he telling the truth? Did he come here at sundown, or much later at night, from knowledge of the place?

Joe thought about it. Then he gave it up as useless to think about. Just like Mattock and Peters having been named. Anybody would know them. Any thief, any minister, any miner, and any rider for the Line. Most anybody would know he had been Dave's partner, too. And this Saffron could have stumbled onto the cave.

THE MEN on the Express run were known, if their methods were not such common knowledge. Times and the men of the West being what they were, change-overs were still done under cover of the stockades where relay-horses were kept, and where stations saw to the change of the pouch from one rider to his successor.

"The mail is with the hoss," Joe said then, almost idly. He tensed at Saffron's short laugh. "You mean, it ain't? You mean somebody got to it?"

"Like I said," the other drawled, "I don't know where the hoss is, do I? In what drift, or on what ledge, or under what snowslide, even. No, I laughed at your wariness, Hawes. Us riders don't never leave our pouches, now, do we?"

Joe didn't contradict that. It was true. Only death could part a Pony Express rider from his trust. He

was considering was he able to travel, even with Saffron's help, or should he send the mail on ahead with the substitute rider, when something else hit him. But Saffron had said something that had Joe pondering...

"Where's your pony, Saffron?" he asked, while he thought.

"Down by the rock-trace. Want I should get him? He's sheltered there."

"Would have been warmer and safer here," Joe said gently.

"Not," Saffron said, "if the pony slipped and fell off the narrow ledge outside."

"But it was light when you came."

"Light and windy and icy. You'd ought to know. Want I should get him and take you and the pouch back We'd best get in afore they waste too much time, or someone gets hurt or lost. Anyway, another storm is making up."

Saffron could be all right. Again, Saffron could be a road-agent operating with Indians. But if once he let Saffron get behind that rock, and he was a bad 'un— Besides, Joe's doubts had grown.

"In a little," Joe said. "Let's talk. What's new your way, Saffron? Any records broken lately?"

"Just me, on th' East run," the man said, his eyes glinting relief at Joe's relaxed mood. It's no fun to talk into the nailkeg end of a loaded gun. "That was sure some going! At that, we had to work it so I took th' pouch to trail and on to Virginia City? on the run from Conway."

Joe sat still, waiting. Saffron said, with a laugh, "That was some sight, ol' Conway ridin' hell-for-leather down the trail, pouch outstretched, me waitin' for it, takin' it on at a full gallop." He stopped abruptly, "What is it? You don't know Conway, Hawes?"

Joe started, his mouth smiling. "Jake? You bet! Skinny little runt, isn't he? Couldn't chin himself a foot off the ground, his arms are that weak."

"That's him," Saffron chuckled. "Well, what'll we do?"

Joe came to instant decision. "I'm

"Outlaw is just another name for damn fool", was what Little Bill Guthrie, noted longrider, told Pat. And Pat believed him. But Little Bill had sided Pat Ritchie when he needed help, and Pat insisted on returning the favor. Then treachery struck down the Guthrie gang, and Pat found himself a wanted man.

don't miss

APACHE CROSSING

by Will Ermine

It's featured in the September issue of

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

hurt a little, Saffron. I had to be sure about you. Throw a little more wood on the fire there, and I'll tell you where the pouch is, and we can get going. I'm not getting any stronger. I can't last but so long. But point the fire up so's I can get some warmth, and I'll direct you to the—to the pouch. I'm sure of you now, Saffron."

SAFFRON got Joe's directions right where he stood. He went back, Joe letting him go too far. "No, back this way, Saffron. Now. In front of you. See?"

Saffron looked. "That's just the saddle, and some sort of leather saddle-gear. Stirrups and such. Carbine-holster. And—" Saffron stayed bent over a long time, his left hand going to the saddle, his right hand dropping to the ground.

He came up so swiftly that, even though Joe was ready and waiting for him to do it, the man almost got flattened out behind the crag of jutting rock as he brought the derringer up and into play. The derringer Joe had hurled there to wake the man.

Saffron snapped the trigger frantically, his oaths rising loudly in the confines of the cave. Joe fired, fired again, and made himself flat. But Saffron was hit, was staggering, was sitting down hard, his left hand clutching high up on his right arm where Joe had drilled him.

"Your left arm all right?" Joe asked into the echoes. "Hold it out. Let me see is it all right. Hurry it up, Saffron!"

He shot again, grimly, when Saffron's left arm came clear of his body. The man screamed and screamed again.

"Sorry," Joe Hawes said gently, "Saffron. But a Pony Rider who don't know any better than to know th' mails is part of th' saddle might not know any better than to try and rush another Pony Rider—a real one, and not a fake one teamed up with Injuns to steal gold-dust an' valuable dispatches—even though the fake, renegade rider has an arm shot useless."

Saffron cursed bitterly, his oaths interspersed with his whimperings of pain and rage.

"I calculate you're a road-agent been working with the Injuns," Joe spoke his reckoning of things. "I figure you saw me or Dave make it to our cave, after a ride, and when your Injuns missed me, an' you checked an' saw the *mochila* was gone off th' dead hoss, you came alone to finish me off, but didn't see me behind my rock. So you bedded down to wait for daylight, having come in the dark and thinking I wasn't here, maybe. Thinking I was dead with my *mochila* in a drift."

He held it while Saffron dropped heavily down on his butt, to lean again a wall. The fight was gone from the man.

"Y'know," Joe said, his ears cocked to what might be sounds outside, beyond the bend of the rock, "you know, I used t' think Mattock and them was plumb silly ordering changes o' mail inside stockades, so none would get a real close look-see at our set-up for carryin' the mail. But it makes sense, now. So you thought we carried 'pouches'? Hell, man, a *mochila*—what we carry th' mail and dust in—is a big leather blanket that fits right down over th' saddle horn an' cantle, an' four boxes are sewed into this *mochila,* and padlocked; and we neither got the padlock-keys, nor can we pass the mail without dismounting. Haw! Imagine puny lil' Jake Conway holdin' a four-box *mochila* at arm's-length, whilst ridin' at full gallop! That sure gave you away, Saffron!"

Saffron was silent. So was Joe, listening to outside. A shot came, then a voice. Dave's voice. "Joe, boy? You there?"

Joe Hawes sighed his relief, and sleep started to spread a blanket over his dull eyes. "Sure am, Dave," he raised his reedy-with-weakness voice to answer. "But bring your identification with you, friend. A man has to be certain, and sometimes it is right difficult..."

THE END

Judge Colt Acquits

by Cliff Campbell

Lake Bradley had ridden with the Wild Bunch, but Lobo Ames was a square-shooter, who'd let a man quit when he wanted to try and go straight. But there were others in the renegade crew who felt differently, and Lake knew he'd find both outlaw and lawman against him . . .

LOBO AMES and his Border renegades, circled around the campfire there under the rim-rock's edge, reminded Lake Bradley of a pack of hungry wolves around a dead carcass. And old Lobo, himself, who was doing the talking, reminded Lake of a lean, gray timber wolf.

Sitting on a piece of broken rock, just outside the circle of firelight, Lake Bradley was paying little attention to Lobo. He was watching, as if for the first time, the evil, passion-marked faces of his renegade companions.

"Come tomorrer night, fellers, we make raid on Rosita," Lobo was saying. "Ontil tomórrer, we rest up."

At the word "raid" Lake saw his companions' faces light up in unholy anticipation, and a feeling of revulsion swept through him.

"It's been one damn hard ride up here from Del Rio, Lobo," said Mex Morales. "We better find riper pickin's in Rosita than we did the las' raid you lead us on." This last was clearly a threat. The man's glistening black eyes were fastened on the pale blue ones of Lobo Ames.

"An' another thing, my frien'," put in Quito, younger brother of Mex. "Another thing—we are all getting our bellyful of taking chances, while this one here—" He shrugged a shoulder toward Lake Bradley. "Lobo, why you keep him so *verry* safe in camp?"

Lake Bradley came easily to his feet and moved toward the two brothers. Lake's wide mouth was still turned down at a corner in an habitual crooked grin, but his hands were near the black butts of the Colts that rode low on each hip.

Men hastily cleared a lane between Bradley and the two Morales.

"Easy, son!" the harsh voice of Lobo Ames knifed through the sudden quiet. He swept out a long left arm and held it as a bar across Lake's chest.

"Lis'en to me, Morales." Lobo's voice was low, calm, but it held a menacing quality—like the sibilant whirr of a rattler—that kept the breeds' hands clear of six-gun butts. "Lis'en, I got a lot to unload."

"First, Lake's ridin' with us tomorrer night—but it's because I want him to. Not because you an' Quito think he'd orter. Since Lake is youngest in the gang, I been usin' him to scout out the lay of new towns, before we made raid. Now, though, since this's new country, an' we won't be here but a week, it ain't makin' no differ' if somebody does spot 'im as one of us. And besides, since Tony an' Whitey got wiped out, we need an' extra gunnie. So Lake is ridin'.

"As for there not bein' any loot in Rosita—well, Rosita lays in the middle of Paloma Valley. The Valley's long an' narrer, but plenty rich. The's a big dam acrost one end, makin' a ten-mile lake. Rancheros an' squatters got plenty water—an' make plenty money. The Valley National, in Rosita, orter be chuck full. So'll the saloons an' stores be."

Lobo stepped a little away from Lake. The renegade leader's claw-like hands dropped near his two .45's. He said then, and his voice held a flat, metallic quality:

"Now, Mex; it's showdown. You been havin' ideas here lately; ideas that you'd orter ramrod this bunch. Well, I'm givin' yuh yore chancet. Whenever yo're ready..."

Morales was fast with a six-gun, but he wasn't as fast as Lobo Ames; Mex knew that. His unwinking black eyes darted to right and left, searching the faces of his fellows. He knew, though, that they wouldn't help him—not against Lobo's two .45s.

Mex licked dry lips and tried to smile. "You—you got me wrong, Lobo. I have no desire to lead the boys. It—it just looked like you were playing the favorites when you wouldn't let Lake raid. But now, since he is—"

"You're wrong there," Bradley's smooth, deep voice cut in. "I ain't ridin' with the gang—not never!"

Even Lobo was surprised. "Why, son, yuh—yuh don't mean—"

"I'm pulling out, Lobo." Lake's tone was final. "Somethin's been wrong with me a long time. I just now found what it was: I don't want to be an outlaw. Don't want to live like a hunted c'yote. I aim to find me an honest job.... I'm leavin' now. Any objections?"

"You damn right, me I have the objection!" It was Mex. "I have one big objection! You're not ridin' into Rosita an' telling the Rangers, mebbe, about the raid. You're ridin' with us tomorrow. After that—"

"I'm not joinin' the raid, an' I'm leavin' now," Lake said almost pleasantly. "If you've got anything else to say—"

With a pang of regret Lake saw Mex go for his gun. Lake had hoped to leave without bloodshed, but now he would have to kill Morales. He could do it, he knew; Lobo had taught him plenty of six-gun magic. Lake's hard hand slapped his Colt butt. He saw that Quito, too, was clawing for his revolver.

"Mex is right fellers! We're not lettin' Lake git off—mebbe give us away to the law!" Whang Doolin cried, and several of the others growled their a g r e e m e n t—hands traveling gunward.

In another moment, Lake knew he would be riddled with bullets. First, though, he'd settle with Mex—

"Hold it—ever'body! I'm still roddin' this spread of yeller-bellied wolves! First man drops hammer'll git salivated—plenty!"

Lake and the others had momentarily forgotten Lobo. Lake jerked his head around, saw Lobo with a big Colt in each skinny hand. Lobo had the whole bunch under a cold drop.

"I'll do all the decidin' around here," the gray leader went on. "An' I'm decidin' that if the kid wants a chancet to go straight he gits it. Catch up yore bronc, Lake. I'll hold these rats."

"But you—I ain't lettin' you stay to fight by your—"

"Git goin'!" Lobo commanded. "Won't nuthin' happen to me. If I had yore chancet, I'd go straight too."

THERE WAS no use arguing. Lake went to the saddles piled on the ground, selected his and carried it to where his hammer-headed gelding was picketed. In a few minutes he was riding out of camp. Not having any particular place to go, he headed for the nearest town—Rosita.

He felt strangely light-handed. He was happy, too, happier than he'd ever been before. He only had one regret: he hated to leave old Lobo. He wasn't afraid anything would happen to the old outlaw. The men would cool down soon, all of them except the Morales brothers. And

they didn't have the nerve to jump Lobo.

But Lobo Ames, outlaw that he was, had been a father to Lake. Years ago, Lobo Ames and Charlie Bradley had been friends... Little by little, Lake had wormed the whole story out of Lobo....

Young Charlie Bradley was sheriff of Magnolia County, and Lobo Ames was his deputy. The two young friends were proud of their jobs, were efficient officers—too efficient. They gained the enmity of big Jard Briscoe, crooked politician. Calamity soon followed.

Briscoe framed Charlie Bradley. The politician got one of his friends, Mark Denning, elected tax-assessor. Denning stole some of the county's money, and he and Briscoe made it look as if the sheriff were guilty. The evidence was so damning that Bradley was sentenced to ten years at Huntsville.

Lobo Ames helped the sheriff in a jailbreak. Then, hot-headed, Charlie Bradley killed Mark Denning and Jard Briscoe. The young sheriff waited only to get his two-year-old boy, his wife having died when the baby was born. Then, with a posse snapping at their heels, Charlie Bradley, his baby in his arms, and Lobo Ames fled.

The life of the long-rider was the only thing open to the friends. Down in Mexico Charlie Bradley found an old Mexican woman willing, for a price, to care for the baby. Then he and Lobo Ames took the Owlhoot trail. For twelve years they stuck together—until a lawman's bullet downed Charlie Bradley....

Young Lake Bradley, jogging on toward Rosita, sighed. Lobo Ames had been like a father. He was a killer now, a renegade, a thief—but he was still a man, old Lobo was. He had stuck to Lake's father, through powder smoke and hail of lead. Now he was sticking by Lake....Maybe some day, Lake thought, he could repay the debt owing to Lobo.... Some day, when he was making an honest living, he could settle up....

But it wasn't so easy to get a job. Lake Bradley soon found that out. All day long he hung around Rosita, around the saloons where cattlemen congregated. But in answer to his question, "Need a top hand, mister?" he always got disappointing replies—a shake of the head, a curt "no" or a rude "Ain't needin' a gun hand, feller."

For, although Lake wasn't aware of it, he bore the unmistakable marks of a gunman: his twin, snubbed-down Colts, his never-still gray eyes, even the alert, catlike way he moved about—these and other things branded him for what he was.

By sundown Lake was hungry and discouraged. He could have got money from Lobo, before he had left camp, but he had preferred not to. Now, he was broke and hungry.

Lake was standing in front of the Almeda Bar when Lobo and his renegades swooped down on the town. He saw the knot of fast-riding men come onto one end of Rosita's only street. Being familiar with the outlaw band's procedure, he quickly glanced up the other end of the street. There came the rest of the gang.

"Raid!" somebody shouted. Men ran for cover of the adobe buildings. Six-guns started yammering. For a moment Lake stood u n d e c i d e d. "Come up here, feller! Yuh'll be shot to doll rags!" a voice called. Lake glanced upward, saw several men on top the flat, earthen roof of the saloon. Lake ran inside the building. In a back room he found a ladder leading upward. He climbed it and came out on the roof.

ABOUT A dozen men, all armed with rifles, were lying flat behind the parapet like wall that ran along the front of the roof. Every few feet in the wall there was a square opening. Through these the men were raining lead on the raiders. Cautiously peering over the edge of the wall, Lake saw that the roofs of the other buildings were likewise occupied. Evidently this wasn't the first time Rosita had been raided.

From down below came Lobo's shrill command "Le's drag, fellers! They was all set for us!"

"That damn rat, Bradley, he told them!" growled the silky voice of Mex Morales.

Horses clattered down the street. The renegades gave a final volley with six-guns. In answer, from the roof tops, came a withering rifle fire. Again Lake Bradley peeked over the parapet. Just below he saw Quito Morales reel in the saddle, clutch his middle with both hands and slide limply to the ground.

Up at the far end of the street Lobo and the men left to him were fast gaining the edge of town. Suddenly, though, the renegades spun their horses and dashed back. Lake soon saw why. They had met a large body of mounted men, men who fed steel to their horses and gave chase to the renegades.

"Sheriff's posse," Lake thought. "Badge glinting on the big geezer's vest." Suddenly Lake gasped. A lone horseman had ridden around the corner of the bank, had come out into the street directly in front of the fast-riding raiders.... And the newcomer, slim of figure and with tumbled hair that looked red in the long rays of the sun, was a girl.

Already the outlaws were throwing lead at her. She reined in her mount directly in their path, pulled out a little revolver and started popping away at the renegades.

"My God, Miss Stacey, git back!" yelled a man on the roof of the saloon. "Git outa the way! Yuh'll be killed!"

And Lake Bradley knew that the man spoke the truth; Lake knew the renegades. Some of them wouldn't hesitate about killing a girl.

Now only seventy-five yards, or thereabouts, separated the valiant girl and the renegades. Something had to be done right away, or the girl was doomed.

Then Lake remembered his horse. It was tied to a rail back of the saloon. Lake ran to the back of the roof. No time now for being careful. Without hesitation he jumped, struck the ground hard, and twisted an ankle. He hobbled to the rail. He didn't take time to saddle, but jumped on the animal barebacked.

The renegades were right upon the girl when Lake slogged around the corner of the saloon. The girl had backed her horse from the middle of the street, but she was still shooting at the outlaws. The raiders had slowed up. Some of them were firing at the girl, but most of them were pouring lead back at the sheriff's posse. Up above, the men on the roofs were rapidly thinning the outlaw ranks.

Lake saw apelike Whang Doolin pull his horse to a rearing halt. Grinning evilly Doolin took careful aim at the girl. Lake didn't have time to stop his horse and take a good aim; he flipped up his right-hand Colt and snapped two shots at Doolin. A slug caught the outlaw in the shoulder, jerked him around, and caused him to drop his six-gun. But he whipped his other .45 from its holster and banged away at the fast moving Lake Bradley.

Lake had reached the girl now. He doubted his ability to lift her over to his own horse, and so he did the next best thing. He reached over and slapped her horse on the rump. But the animal was already frightened. It leaped into the air, sunfished—and the girl thudded to the ground, lay still.

Cursing himself, Lake leaped from his horse. As he stooped and hoisted the girl up in his arms, it seemed as if a sledge hammer had fallen on his head. He knew, though, that a slug had creased him. Fighting to hold his reeling senses, he staggered with the girl around the corner of the bank.

The renegades came dashing by. Mex Morales saw Lake, emptied his six-gun at him. Then the raiders were gone—and Lake felt blood running down his chest from a hole under the collar-bone.

Gently he laid his light burden down. Rocking slightly he stood looking down at the girl. "Pretty as a picture," he muttered, "but not for a renegade." Then the ground leaped up to meet him...

WHEN Lake Bradley came to he was lying between clean white

sheets on the softest bed he had ever been in. He thought perhaps he was dreaming. And when he turned his head and saw the golden-haired, blue-eyed vision that was sitting beside the bed, he knew he was—until she spoke.

"Oh," she cried, seeing his eyes open, "I'm so glad! The doctor said you'd be all right, but I was afraid—"

Lake tried to grin. "I'm in fine shape," he assured her, "Miss—uh—"

"Grayson," she supplied. "My friends call me Stacy." She looked questioningly at him.

"I go by Bradley," he told her. "Lake Bradley." Too late it came to him that maybe he should have given another name. Mex Morales had growled the name "Lake Bradley" loud enough for many men to hear.

"I want to thank you, Mr. Bradley, for—"

"Shucks," he growled. "You'd oughta be spanked. Them raiders would of killed you sure."

"I couldn't help it," she said meekly. "You see, I had a brother once—about your age. He was killed when some bandits raided here once before. When I saw those—those ruffins yesterday, I went kind of crazy, I guess. But don't scold me—dad has done enough of that. He wants to thank you, too. He saw the whole thing. He's sheriff here, you know."

A tall but slightly stooped man, with heavy, iron-gray hair and twinkling blue eyes set in a weather-beaten face, came into the room. As he moved toward the bed, Lake noted the star on his vest.

"Hullo, yuh young game cock," the sheriff greeted. "Yuh ain't lettin' a coupla slugs git yuh down, are yuh?" He smiled.

Lake grinned back. He felt himself liking this grizzled old-timer. "Just restin' up, sheriff. Be good as new by tomorrow."

"I was scoutin' along the river yesterday," the sheriff told Lake. "Heard Lobo Ames and his gang had drifted into Big Bend country, an' blamed if Lobo didn't pick the time I was out lookin' for him, to raid Rosita. I got back in time to make 'im pay, though!"

"How many men killed?" Lake wanted to know.

"I lost Jeff Parsons, My deppity. We killed six of Lobo's skunks.... That reminds me, son; I hear you've been askin' around town for a job. With Jeff gone, I'm needin' a new depitty—needin' one bad, with Lobo an' his crew skulkin' around. How 'bout it, son—want the job? I seen yesterday yuh had nerve an' could shore handle a six."

"Sheriff," Lake said fervently, "you've got a deputy." Then he got to thinking. Maybe he ought to tell the sheriff about himself, about the days with the gang. Sheriff Grayson was a good man. "One thing I oughta tell you, though," Lake commenced. "I've rode with a wild bunch. I've—"

"Yo're too puny now to start confessin' yore crimes," Grayson said, laughing. "Wait'll yuh git perter." He headed for the door, but called: "Make Stacy wait on you. She swore she wouldn't, if yuh starved to death—you slappin' her critter's rump, thataway, and gittin' 'er th'owed."

Lake looked at Stacy, saw she was blushing. He grinned.

Despite her threat, though, she did wait on him—and seemed to like it. She held a mirror while he shaved, brought all his food, read to him. The three days Lake spent in bed were the happiest of his life. He was almost sorry when he was able to be up and around. He spent two more days walking around the house and sitting on the porch swing talking to Stacy.

IN SOME ways the five days Lake spent in the Grayson's home seemed like a dream. He continually had a feeling that he was going to wake up and find himself back in the renegade camp. Such happiness, such peace and contentment couldn't be for Lake Bradley, a gunman born.

Lake felt strong enough one morning to walk down to the jail, where Sheriff Grayson had a little office. As he started through a doorway of the jail, a man came hurrying out, nearly knocked Lake down.

"Where in hell yuh think you're going, my frien'?" the fellow growled, in tones somehow silky. "So!—it's you, eh?"

"Funny, Mex, you comin' from the sher'ff's office," Lake said pleasantly.

Mex Morales' black eyes narrowed. "I might ask you a question, too, eh? What business you got with the sheriff, huh?"

"A hell of a lot more than you. If you want to know, I'm Sheriff Grayson's deputy," Lake said shortly, and pushed past the breed and on into the jail.

With Sheriff Grayson's first words, Lake knew why Morales had been to see the officer.

"I just had some news, Lake," Grayson greeted him. "Lobo Ames an' his wolves are raidin' Pinto tonight. It's a little town on the edge of the Valley. There's a company of Rangers camped about ten miles down the Rio I'm goin' after 'em. Lobo'll git a warm reception when he rides into Pinto."

"Y'sure your information's straight?" Lake asked. "This might be a trick to get you out of town. Maybe Lobo aims to try Rosita again."

"I thought of that," the sheriff admitted. "But my information came pretty straight. Anyway, I've warned men here to be ready for a raid. I'm leavin' you to take charge if anything breaks."

Lake Bradley walked out of the sheriff's office with a giddy, empty feeling deep inside him. Although he hadn't admitted it to himself, he had already been making vague plans. With his deputy job, he had told himself, he could be a respectable citizen. Grayson was old; maybe, in time, Lake would be sheriff. Maybe he and Stacy—

But that was all over now. Lake didn't even debate the matter. He knew what he must do. He must warn Lobo and the others, they who had been his companions. He couldn't let them ride into the Ranger trap. He would wait, though, till the sheriff got back. Maybe the Rangers had left the country....

It was just before dark when Sheriff Grayson came riding back. He found Lake at the office in the jail.

"I've shore got a trap set for ol' Lobo!" the sheriff chorted. "He won't even git to Pinto! He'll figger on ridin' through Bullhide Pass; that's the only way from the river to Pinto. Well, he'll ride into the Pass, all right, but him nor nary man'll ride out. Rangers'll be lined thicker'n fleas on a dog's back in them blackjacks alongside the Pass." The sheriff stopped and looked keenly at his new deputy. "What's wrong, son? You're pale as a ghost."

"I—don't feel well," Lake muttered. "Believe I'll go lie down awhile."

When Lake got to the house, though, he didn't lie down. He caught up his gelding, saddled it, then went into the house. Buckling on his two Colts he came out of his room, ran into Stacy.

Immediately she seemed to sense something wrong. "Why, Lake, where are you going? You—you mustn't overdo things. You're not well."

"I—tell your father I can't take the deputy job." Lake's voice was flat, dead. "I've been called out of town."

"You're going back to the bandits," she almost sobbed. "Oh, Lake, I—I thought—"

"So you knew," he said. "I wanted to keep it from you. I thought—but it doesn't make any difference now."

"Dad knows, too," she told him. "Some man told him this morning to watch out for you. But dad said it didn't make any difference if you had been one of Lobo Ames' gang. He said he believed in you and was going to give you a chance. And now—" She choked and stopped, but Lake knew what she had intended saying.

All this only made it harder for Lake. Sheriff Grayson had confidence in him, was willing to give him a chance. And now he had to let the sheriff down. He had to let Stacy down.... And he had to hurry. It was getting dark.

"Good-by, Stacy," he said gruffly. "I'll be seein' you sometimes, maybe."

Wheeling, he ran from the house and leaped onto his horse.

IT WAS nearly dark, would be in a few minutes, and it was about five miles to the outlaw camp. Lake pushed the gelding hard. Shortly after dark he rode into the outlaw camp there by the Rio Grande. All the way from Rosita Lake had been thinking. He wasn't sorry that he had to give up his chance for happiness. He owed a debt to Lobo, and this was his chance to repay the old renegade.

It was a few minutes after dark, but Lake hadn't thought the raiders would be gone. However, the camp looked deserted. Only one thing to do now: try to overtake the renegades.

Then Lake heard a low moan over to his left. Soon he located the sound. It was coming from behind some scrub mesquites. He found old Tod Hennigan, badly wounded, hid in the thicket.

"Where's Lobo and the rest?" Lake demanded. He saw that old Tod had been left to die, was going fast. "Who shot you?"

Old Tod's answer was so low that Lake had to bend close to hear it. "Hell's been poppin' here, Lake. Mex and Lobo came together. I heard Mex plottin' with some of his hombres to make a private raid on Pinto. Mex caught me listenin' an' shot me. Lobo was goin' to kill Mex, then, but decided he'd wait till after the raid. Five of the gang's sidin' the breed. Mex told Lobo he an' his men wouldn't he'p on the Pinto raid, but they'd wait right here an' settle things when Lobo an' the boys got back."

"Then where'd Mex an' his skunks go?" Lake demanded. "Lobo ought of known Mex wouldn't wait here."

"Mex took his hombres up to the dam," old Tod gasped. "Mex has been like a crazy man ever since the Rosita raid, when Quito got hisself kilt. He don't know who drilled Quito so he said he was wipin' out the whole uh Paloma Valley. He took dynamite with 'im."

For a moment Lake was stunned by the news. Then he came to life. "He's goin' to blow up the dam! This narrow valley'll be a ragin' flood!...How long's he been gone, Tod? Quick!"

"'Bout twenty minutes. He—"

But Lake didn't wait for further and fed it steel. Then it came back particulars. He swung onto his horse to him why he had come to the outlaw camp. Old Lobo was riding into a death trap, old Lobo who had been like a father to him, who had tried to give him the chance to go straight.

For an instant, in his mind Lake was undecided. He had come to pay Lobo a debt. Now he was letting his old friend ride to certain death.... But Stacy, she would be in the path of the raging water. So would hundreds of honest, innocent people —mothers, babies, helpless old people. Lives of hundreds such as those were staked against the lives of seven or eight renegades. What was it old Lobo had said once? "I ain't got nothin' to live for, son! no friends, no kin, no nothin'. Mebbe if I did—"

Lake urged his mount ahead faster. By the time the dam loomed up ahead, ghostly gray in the bright moonlight, the gelding was laboring for breath. Lake was wondering where Mex and his men were when, at the base of the dam, a match flared.

"They're lightin' the fuse!" Lake gasped. No time now to ease up on the renegades. He spurred the gelding forward. The gallant animal leaped ahead, came to the edge of the dry river bank. Sitting back on its haunches, the gelding slid down the bank. Relieved, Lake saw the match go out. He knew the fuse had not been lit; he would have been able to see the fuse burning.

From the dark shadow at the base of the dam came lances of orange flame. As Lake leaped to the ground, bullets zipped past his ears, tugged at his clothes. He was, he knew, plainly outlined in the moonlight, while his opponents were completely hidden in shadow.

Until now, Lake had not thought of the odds against him. He had held

one thought close in his mind: he had to save the dam. Now, though, he realized he had a slim chance of besting Mex and his men. They were six to one.... He clenched his teeth, darted for the cover of some boulders. He had to save the dam!

As Lake dived headfirst into the nest of boulders, a slug ripped across his side. Others smashed against the rock, splattered him with lead. Then he was inside the covert of the boulders. Cautiously he looked over the top of his natural fortress. Resting a Colt on the rock, he fired at the flashes of the renegades' guns.

"Maybe somebody'll hear us," he thought. "Maybe help will come. I'll try to hold 'em off."

THEN, UNDER the base of the dam, another match flared. The renegades were making a second attempt to light the fuse. When it was lit, Lake knew, the outlaws would scamper up the steep bank of the dry river. There, high up on the bank, they would be safe when the dam went out. But the people down in Paloma Valley, they would drown like trapped rats.

Lake scrambled out of his covert, started walking steadily toward the renegades, toward the burning match. He knew he'd probably be killed, that then the dam would go, but he had to take chances.

The six-guns jumped and bellowed in his hands. A howl of pain told him he'd hit one jasper. Then he saw a shower of sparks, thought he heard a hissing noise. The fuse had caught! Throwing caution to the wind, he started running forward. Something smashed through his side, knocked him down. He pulled up to his hands and knees, crawled a few feet, then stopped, dizzy and fighting to keep conscious.

Dimly he heard the renegades scrambling up the steep bank. Then he heard somebody running behind him. Weakly he raised his Colt, aimed at the dim figure coming toward him.

"Hold 'em, Lake!" the figure croaked. "The artillery is comin'."

"Lobo!" Lake sighed. "Good ol' Lobo!"

The rest was like a dream to Lake, a nightmare. Somehow he staggered to his feet and got to the dam. He yanked on a fuse, remembered later of seeing a whole case of dynamite in one of the gates of the dam.

Then the renegades were streaming back down the steep bank. Horsemen that had appeared from somewhere on the bank above were raining lead at the outlaws. Lobo's Colts were bellowing in Lake's ears. Without consciously willing it, Lake started firing at Mex and his men who were coming toward him.

After that, all Lake remembered was the acrid smell of gunsmoke, the roar of six-shooters, the cries of wounded men. Then suddenly all was quiet, and men were crowding around him.

"Somebody give 'im a drink of whiskey!" a husky voice commanded, and Lake dimly knew that Sheriff Grayson was speaking. "He's not hit bad. Hurry, yuh monkeys—git goin' after them two that got away! They'll head for the Rio!

A flask was held to Lake's lips and he took a long pull. In a minute he felt stronger. He wondered how he came to be lying on the ground. He heard men riding away. Then Sheriff Grayson was bending over him.

"Where's Lobo?" Lake demanded. "He—"

"Here, son," Lobo growled. "I couldn't run. That Morales, or one of his hombres, busted my leg. Now I'll finish my days in the pen. Damn shame I couldn't of been kilt."

"You boys done a—a man-sized job here to-night." The old sheriff's voice was very husky. "Hadn't been for you, the whole uh Paloma Valley'd of been wiped out. My darter Stacy—" His voice broke.

"Shucks, Sher'ff, it wasn't nothin' " Lake said. "Me an' Lobo, we always did hate Mex."

The sheriff said, "How come, Lobo, yuh didn't ride to Pinto? I reckon yore men's wiped out."

"Mex Morales promised to wait for me in camp," Lobo answered. "Him an' me was goin' to shoot it out. Halfway nearly to Pinto, I got

to thinkin' that mebbe Morales was fixin' to pull somethin'. I left the boys go on by theirselves, an' I went back to camp. Old Tod there told me Mex had gone to blow up the dam. I thought I'd better foller im an' git even for his lyin' to me....Well, Sher'ff, le's git on to'rds jail."

"JAIL, HELL!" the old sheriff snorted. "When you two faced that gang of killers, when yuh saved Paloma Valley—you was bein' tried by Judge Colt, hisself. An' the judge issued yuh unconditional pardons. An now, Lobo, I got a proposition for yuh. That's why I sent the boys away. The' wasn't none uh those bandits got away. I jus' wanted to talk with you private.

"I hear tell, Lobo, you was oncet a A-1 deppity. I'm needin' one of them critters. I was kinda figgerin' to use Lake, here, but a job's a mite dangerous for a married man. An' from the way my darter Stacy was a-rantin' an' a-beggin' for me to go find Lake, I know she's aimin' to run the brand uh matrimony plumb acrost his hide. After the weddin' I'm figgerin' to make Lake ramrod of a little rancho I got in the upper end of Paloma.

"Well, what about it, Lobo?"

"What about it!" old Lobo breathed. "Lord, Sher'ff, I been honin' for a honest job ever since I hit the Owlhoot trail. An' now I got somethin' to live for. Mebbe Lake's little shavers'll call me gran'-paw!"

THE END

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DIGGER JOHN and the PYGMY

by A. A. Baker

(author of "Digger John's Flume")

"Fer years Digger John's been playin' his practical jokes on Gold Run. Now he's the butt-end of one hisself . . . wait until he finds he's been sent out on a wild-goose chase fer a treasure that never existed!"

THE REDHEADED pigmy Indian, clambered atop a smooth quartz outcropping on the peak of Cold Spring mountain. He hunkered down until his knees spread almost parallel to his splayed feet; his mouth was open sucking in greedy breaths. The sharp pointed teeth glittered through his light red whiskers and the deep blue of his eyes flickered as he studied the terrain.

The high Sierras smoked from a forest fire deep within their uncharted depths and the hot sun snaked through the tall trees and added it's furnace blast to the tortured land.

Just below, rested the mountain town of Gold Run, surrounded by the raw, red hydraulic diggings. The reservoirs on the high hills were dry and caked with red mud. The water was gone and the pipes would rust until the fall storms swirled in and drained the heat from the iron and blistering rocks and gravel.

Gold Run sat amid this super-heated splendor like a black simmering bean pot, with a heavy lid. Inside *Dredger Dan's Hotel and Saloon*, the simmering was rapidly breaking into a boil that gave every indication of blowing the lid off.

Finn Crowdy had the floor and his brogue thickened with anger and Dredger's uncut redeye. "Tis said that the Irish, with their tales of the little people that roam the broad green fields of the Emerald Isle, are the blamedest liars in the world, but Digger. . . !" Finn placed his back to the bar, freed his bowie knife from the holding buckskin loop and growled thickly, "Digger John is the biggest liar in the entire state of California!"

"That's quite a brag," said the big miner in the barrel chair, with ominous calm. "California's a big place. Comin' from an Irishman, thet means yew want to fight an', if'n yew want to fight, then I'll be a danged-blue-bellied-ape if'n I ain't goin' to oblige yew!"

A hush as deep as a marble tomb settled in the barroom. Miners edged back against the wall, gamblers methodically began stacking their chips, and the swamper toed the brass gaboons from the center of the room. The breeze, gently swinging the batwings, mingled with the shuffle of feet as all eyes turned and watched Digger John rise slowly from his chair.

Dredger Dan moved swiftly. He snatched the polished, double-barreled shotgun from its peg and turned, with hammers cocked. "They's bin three fights too. . ." but the words died in his throat as Digger snatched the gun and, with an easy sweep, slid it across the sawdust floor and under the batwings, not slowing in his calm advance toward Finn Crowdy.

"Finn, my Irish lad," Digger's

Digger John held the little man up by the hair. "Anybody oughter know that yew can't swim with thet much gold aroun' your middle!"

words were soft, but carried the challenge of a fighting man, "kin yew back up them words? Kin yew say thet I'm a lyin' man an' prove it, or are yew invitin' an early death 'cause yew're tired of livin' in this fine land of gold? Are yew...?"

"That I can prove, without trouble!" shouted Finn. "But I've no mind to do so now; I've a mind to carve four hundred dollars out of your onery hide, for the sale of a horse!" the Irishman snatched a bar towel from a metal hoop and wrapped it slowly around his left forearm. He held the two-edged bowie, point forward, and watched Digger's measured advance. The big miner moved deliberately and Finn stared tensely. There was death

close enough to stifle the air of the saloon; the heavy breathing of the men could be heard above the solemn tread of Digger's boots.

NOBODY noticed the red head, with its grinning, pointed teeth, peering under the batwings. The small figure pursed his thick mustached lips and out clicked the dreaded rattle or a fighting, striking rattlesnake. The castenet of death shocked through the tense men and seemed to ricochet off the smoke colored walls.

Finn jumped in terror and, quick as the flare of a stick match, Digger was on him! The bowie slashed across the buckskin of Digger's shirt but he ignored the knife and got a strong hold on the toweled arm, then pulled sharply. Finn's arm creaked and he lost his balance in a wild dance step as he smashed face on, against the rough board wall. Digger kept his hold on the towel and, with a quick swirl, snuggled the cloth around Finn's straining neck. With his free hand, Digger slapped the struggling man with his big hat. As Finn lost his breath, he lost his knife and Digger deftly kicked his opponent's ankle until every man in the bar could hear the bone crack.

"Naow, thet's done..." growled the panting miner as he bent and retrieved Finn's knife, ..."let's find thet rattler. Must be a big one!"

The pigmy had slipped inside the barroom. He loosed another rattler buzz that seemed to come from beneath Digger's feet and the big man jumped halfway onto the bar and glared around the dim room until his eyes lit, accusingly upon the little Indian's red head.

"It's a red headed rattlesnake!" shouted Digger, as he reached out a hand the size of a frying pan and grasped the grinning Indian by his bushy hair. "What's the idea? Where in hades' blue brimstone did yew come from?"

"Bo-mar, Bomar!" was the laughing answer. The round eyes twinkled as he let his gaze jump from the groaning Finn Crowdy to Digger's face. "Got to-baccy?" He pursed his lips, and once again the rattle of the snake chattered forth.

Digger loosed the mass of hair and grinned in appreciation as he dug into a pocket and held forth a twist of tobacco. "Thet's a handy trick to have, Bomar. Sure saved my bacon when Finn was ready to cut my gizzard out!" He patted the little man on the head and the pigmy dug into a buckskin bag and extracted a soiled piece of paper.

Digger took the note and stared at the words. His lips puckered and he grunted. Sheepishly, he handed the note to Slim Deakins, who had started to restack his chips on the roulette table. "Read her for me, Slim; the light's bad here an' I'm a little out'a practice."

Gambler Slim Deakins studied the note, then solemnly read it aloud;

This will introduce Bomar. The last of his race. He's an honest to injun, pigmy injun. He's been hanging around Hangtown for several weeks, trying to find someone to go find Tsawahabitts' burial grounds and bring back the tons of gold that were buried with him. There's nobody so well qualified to find such a grave as Digger John and therefore the Miner's Court of Hangtown has directed him to Gold Run, the home of this great Prevaricator! We don't care if he ever finds Gold Run, or Digger John, but, if'n he ever returns to Hangtown, it will be our pleasure to add another hanging to our record!

DREDGER DAN was the first to find words. "Naow then, yew see what kind'a reputation yew're gettin' Gold Run! A fightin', lyin', no-good pocket hunter isn't so bad, but naow they's sendin' in all the misfits! Guess they figger if'n we'll let Digger live here, we'll put up with anythin'; even rattlesnake Injuns!"

Bomar happily scratched his belly and grinned understandingly. His jagged teeth hissed out words. "Tsawahabitts have much gold! Buried

in desert. Bomar take Digger John to gold! Like this...see?" His clawed fingers rubbed his middle.

The miners muttered and crowded around. Circling the pigmy's waist was a belt of gold! Four inches wide, and half an inch thick; it fit so snugly it could neither go over his head nor down the narrow hips.

Bomar jiggled gleefully at their interest. "All gold," he said, "Bomar have belt many, many years. Grow tight."

Digger John spat reflectively and eyed Dredger Dan. "Them words about lyin', I'm gonna overlook... for the present! But, this little feller interests me. Anyone with thet much gold, enough to make a belt out'a, is worth talkin' to. Tsawahabitts, I heard of, an' he was a giant thet liked to eat Injuns. Thet fella could step across the Sacramento River. He used to run loose in Nevada country, up by the border of Idaho. Them Indians never go 'round his old stampin' grounds 'cause he used to catch huntin' parties an' stuff 'em in a basket he carried on his back! This belt," he pointed a splayed thumb at Bomar, "is probably a ring off'n Tsawahabitts' finger!"

The little Indian followed the speech of Digger with quick, smiling nods, then repeated, "You come, Digger John. Bomar take you to Tsawahabitts' graveplace. Much gold there!"

While Digger stared in doubt, Slim Deakins spoke. "This fellow, Bomar, must belong to that tribe of Pigmies who lived in Nevada. The story goes, that years ago the Piutes got tired of these little Indians ganging up on hunting parties and carrying them off. Seems these pigmy redheads would kidnap the Indians and finally, the Piutes gave warning that they'd wipe them out. The pigmies were driven into a big cave, out in the desert, and the Piutes piled brush and mesquit around the opening of the cave and burnt almost every pigmy inside. A few got away, and set up in Idaho country and Bomar here must be one of those." He eyed Bomar

sternly. "They're known to be devilish critters. Tough, stubborn and full of tricks. Somewhat like the little people that the Irish are always telling about!"

As Slim moved back his chair, the screetch of an injured dog filled the bar. Slim, thinking he'd landed on a sleeping dog's tail, lost his balance and crashed to the floor. He stared at the little man, and rose sheepishly. The twinkle of Bomar's eyes held down Slim's temper and slowly, he put away his Derringer.

"Bomar, you got yoreself a pardner!" Digger took the pigmy's arm and led him over toward the door. "We'll find up a grubstake; I got plenty burro's'n fittin's, but we'll need some food, an' maybe some powder, or did them Hangtown people agree to fix thet too?"

"If'n yew'll get out'a this country," shouted Dredger Dan unexpectedly, *"I'll* grubstake yew! I'll get yew enough stake to send yew as far as China an' maybe on through to Hades! Go on by the warehouse an' tell the manager to give yew what yew need. An' ", Dredger half screamed, "by all thet's holy, get enough to last a year, 'cause if'n yew're goin', go for a long time! We need some rest 'n peace 'round here!"

A look of genuine amazement crossed Digger's face. "Ain't yew lettin' yore temper get away from yew, Dredger? Most times yew'll let a man have a sack of beans only if'n he guarantees to bring back a sack of dust thet's bigger'n the sack of beans! How-some-ever," he added

hastily, "I'll just take thet grubstake an' bring yew back one of Tsawahabitts' arm bracelets. If'n he was as big as they say, a bracelet should be big enough to shoe a wagon wheel!" He turned, "Come on, Bomar. Let's get us thet stake 'fore Dredger realizes what he's offered."

* * *

THE FOLLOWING morning, the citizens gathered in the early dawn to watch Digger and Bomar trudge down Main Street. The Jennies were heavily laden and their packs rolled with each rhythmic step. Bomar skipped in and out of the crowd and the squeal of cats and the clatter of falling rocks had the citizens skittish until they caught on and cursed sheepishly at the little Indian. With a wave and a shout, Digger and his Jennies disappeared toward the Donner Summit, Bomar hopping happily in his wake.

Back in Dredger's saloon, the men gathered for a drink and were surprised to hear Dredger shout, "Drinks on the house! This is cause for a celebration. For once I've fooled thet triple-blasted pocket hunter! He's wild goose chasin' this time. Wild Goose John'll be his name when he gets back to Gold Run!"

"What'd you mean, Dredger?" Slim asked.

"They never *was* a Tsawahabitts; he's jest a Piute legend! Like Paul Bunyan. *I* fixed it up that Bomar came, I even writ thet letter he had, from the Hangtown Vigilante Committee!" His own cunning overcame him and Dredger buried his face in his arms and howled with glee. Finally he raised a mirth wet face and gasped, "Digger...Digger's been pullin' tricks on us for years an'... an' he finally fell for one hisself!" He was off on another gale of laughter.

Dredger's happiness was so great, that the men grunted in appreciation, for he was right; Digger needed some taking down. Every man in the bar could remember some trick the big miner had pulled and the town of Gold Run lived on a fired powder keg when Digger was in town.

They recalled Digger's latest joke—one that had blown out Oathes reservoir and flooded Main street. He had arranged a shooting contest and buried a keg of black powder behind the target. The target had been set against the wall of the reservoir; the first shot had hit the bulls-eye, and the black powder explosion brought down the wall and half drowned the participants. Then there was the time he brought home the pet skunks and the time he undermined Dredger's warehouse to get out a pocket. They remembered the time he'd buried the hive of bees at the fourth of July picnic. Buried it at the foot of the whiskey barrel and the first man to kick the loose earth aside, freed the bees in a whirling fury, and nobody could get near the whiskey for the rest of the afternoon. The men in the barroom chuckled, and agreed that if Digger was caught on a wild-goose chase that would lead him on a fruitless trek over half of Nevada, then no one deserved it more. They drank Dredger's whiskey and waited happily for the day of his return, to rub the salt of ridicule into his aching trailworn feet.

* * *

FOUR DAYS out, and Digger's burro caravan trudged along the high wall of the Truckee River. They had crossed the summit and the long canyon of the Truckee was winding out and into the desert lands of Nevada.

Digger looked like he'd been on the trail for weeks, and felt like he was traveling with St. Nick himself. The burros were as skittish as jackrabbits and the tingle of their bells jangled in the dead, hot air. The nights behind them were filled with the screetch of wildcats; the thudding pads of fighting grizzlies; the searing cries of hungry wolves—and one night, the whole string had stampeded at the vibrating, roaring, toot of a riverboat steam whistle!

Digger was so close to murder that he had thrown his ammunition away to keep from killing the ver-

satile Bomar. The little bearded wildman was skipping ahead of the burro train and Digger watched him in dreadful expectancy. There was a roar and the burros nervously wheeled and scattered; circling, they charged on Digger. He held his ground and the little animals clustered around him and stared ahead at Bomar. Digger grunted. "He's got yew fellas a wreck too, eh?" The burros huddled tightly around the miner and their big eyes begged him to do something about their tormentor.

Digger strode ahead and his voice was mild as he spoke. "Bomar, we camp here. Yew've been givin' the burros the willies again with those noises of yores'. They're so scared they look under every rock 'fore they'll put a foot down. We'll camp an' take us a bath; after we get out in thet danged desert, they'll be little enough water to drink, let alone wash in, so now we'll take us a Digger John bath. Dive in with all yore clothes on and get them washed at the same time. Never heard of it, I'll betcha?" He looked at the grinning Indian and snorted, "Hell, yew probably never heard of a bath! It's a good thing I brought the lye soap; it'll be just the thing to get us clean!"

"Sure, Bomar take bath!" He rushed toward the stream, plunged into the cold mountain water, and sank like a rock!

Digger charged down the bank and dove into the narrow, boiling stream. His eyes searched through the bubbling depths and caught the glint of gold that was Bomar's belt, he reached down and hooked the bushy hair and soon had the unconscious Indian on the bank.

While he worked the water out of Bomar's lungs, Digger mumbled heatedly, as though he could be understood. "Anybody oughta know, even a redheaded pigmy Indian, thet you couldn't swim with thet much gold around yore middle!" Digger's voice trailed off momentarily and his eyes narrowed, "Mebbe he ain't wore thet gold belt so long as he makes out...we'll jest see what's goin' on!"

Swiftly, Digger gathered a few green reeds; cut slices of the lye soap, and tied the poultice under Bomar's armpits, then waited for the Indian to regain consciousness.

They laid in the canyon for over a week. The Indian grew weaker; his face turned pale and his heart flutters could be seen through his yellowed skin. Digger's face was long as he bent over the ailing pigmy and his words were softly solemn.

"Bomar, looks like yew couldn't stand the water touching your body. Prob'ly the first time yew ever had a bath all over and it done yew in! Anyway, we'll bury yew decent, right here where the stream noises'll keep yew company. I'll never find Tsawahabitts' g o l d e n bracelets but..."

Bomar opened fever ridden eyes and spoke. "Bomar been many times in water. Swim good...jus' forgot about gold belt and sink. Do not understand sickness..."

"You mean yore belt is somethin' new?" queried Digger. "Yew never wore it as long as yew said?"

"Dredger Dan...he gave me gold belt!" The pigmy grinned weakly

and watched Digger's face as he continued. "Gave me belt and pulled good trick on Digger John, to lead you far away, look for Tsawahabitts!"

The big miner hastily removed the lye soap poultices and stirred up the fire. He ladeled out a tin plate of soup from the pot. "Yew'll soon be back on yore feet, Bomar. Yew was sick from the affects of thet lye soap. Makes yore heart beat hard and gives a fever. Done it on purpose to find out what this was all about! Now I know where the smell from the wind is blowing. Right from Dredger Dan! We'll get yew well an' then figure how to turn the tables on the rascal; here, hold up yore head an' get this soup into yew!"

* * *

THE HOT peak of summer had passed and Gold Run ceased to wonder where Digger was. The leaves on the black oaks had seared and dropped from the trees to mingle with the dead pine needles that carpeted the dark recesses of the forests. The first hint of winter appeared over the Sierras in the form of fleece streaked clouds, and the hydraulic miners oiled their boots and got ready for the downpour. The river miners dug frantically on the low side of the American River to get the last glint of gold dust before the rush of stormy waters drove them out of the canyons.

Dredger was sitting in his office, going through his account books in anticipation of payment, now that the hydraulic mines would re-open. He turned the pages slowly and spoke to Slim Deakins, who was sprawled in a chair by the stove. "With an early winter comin' on, looks like I'll collect some of these bar bills soon." He flipped the pages and stopped, chuckling. "Here's Digger's grubstake. Six months beans, two bars of lye soap; flour, bacon, and t'was worth every cent to get Digger John lost for the entire summer. Some josh we'll have on him as long as he lives! Tsawahabitts...like the pot o' gold at the end of the rainbow!"

Slim grinned and shifted his long legs to a more comfortable position before he replied. "Well, I for one, miss the rascal. He's a troublesome man at times, but he's lively and while he's been gone, there's been something missing from Gold Run." His mouth curved upward in a sardonic smile. "You watch your step when he comes back, because he's apt to turn your joke into an Australian boomerang."

A lusty shout penetrated the quiet of Dredger's office. The clump of running feet shook the room and brought Dredger and Slim out through the empty bar into the street. They gazed in amazement at the procession coming down Main street.

Digger John marched solemnly ahead of his pack of Jennies. His clothes were worn but his stride was firm and he roared greetings to the gathering populace. Turning, he shouted to Bomar, who was leading a pair of burros hitched clumsily to a two-wheeled wagon. "Drive thet rig right over here, where the folks can see what we brung back!" Bomar hauled the patient animals to the water trough and Digger directed attention to the contents of the wagon.

"There's the arm bracelets of Tsawahabitts!" The miners craned their necks and stared. There were two hoops, big enough for a small boy to walk through, and wide as the valve connection of an hydraulic line. Two hoops that glittered in the sun and dazzled the greedy eyes of the gold seekers!

Digger shouldered aside the flurried, excited questions, and shouted. "Drinks is on me! Gather in Dredgers bar an' help me catch up on my drinkin'!" He strode through the batwings and took his customary stand by the open whiskey barrel.

The place was jammed and Dredger Dan fluttered in nervous circles, trying to make himself heard. Suddenly, the shouting men were stunned by the thundering roar of a double barreled shotgun. Firmly entrenched on the stairs, was Dredger Dan. "They's gotta be some or-

der! Shut up every one of yew an' let Digger tell us about it! Don't forget, *I* grubstaked Digger an' half of what he found is mine! Now Digger m'boy, what in thunderation happened?" Dredger sounded half out of his mind with curiosity.

"Jest like I said outside," Digger slowly dipped his tin cup in the barrel and drained it. He wiped his bearded face with the back of his hand and turned to dip his cup again when he was halted by a hysterical shout from Dredger. *"What happened! Where'd yew get it? The gold bracelets? When...?"*

RELUCTANTLY, Digger set down his cup and answered. "Bomar led me right to a great cave, 'way out in the Nevada desert—almost dead east of the Ruby Mountains. They was piles of bones in the cave, place big enough to plant a thousand acres of wheat, and the floor just covered with bones of skeletons. Bomar told me all about it. Seems Tsawahabitts was a good friend to the little pigmy tribe. Right friendly giant he was, with one bad habit; he liked to catch Piute injuns. He'd catch their huntin' parties an' run off with them. Well, the Piutes thought the pigmies was killin' off their men an' set out to wipe them out."

Digger gulped a hasty swallow and continued: "Them Piutes done it, too, 'cause Tsawahabitts got sick an' the little Injuns was takin' care of the big fellow. The Piutes surrounded the cave where the pigmies was holed up with their big friend; the Piutes set fires at the cave mouth an' all the little fellas smothered. Big Tsawahabitts, he smothered too! The pigmies prob'ly could'a saved theirselves by tellin' the Piutes 'bout Tsawahabitts, but they was his friend an' they tried to protect him when he was sick. Only a few of them ever got out of the cave alive."

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"Then them arm bands was in thet cave?" Dredger howled.

"Yup, they was in the cave an' we built us that crazy wagon an' hauled 'em out. Then, we blasted the mouth of the cave in, so's nobody else'd disturb the place." He dipped his cup and a miner shouted. "How much one o' them arm bands weigh, Digger?"

"'Bout half a ton of solid gold! One for Dredger, an' one for Bomar an' me. Dredger was kind enough to grubstake us, so's he can have his pick!"

Dredger was bouncing like a ball, "Hey!" he shouted, "couple o' yew men drag one of them into my back room. I'll get me in a hunert gallon iron cookin' kettle, set it up an' melt her down. Jeb, yew get a sledge hammer from the cellar an' I'll beat thet arm band down some so we can get it into the pot. Hurry man, we got us a fortune an' I..." The fat little hotelowner rushed toward the back still talking, as the men hastened to obey.

Digger suddenly looked like a man in a hurry. Taking Slim by the arm, after lifting a half gallon jug from behind the bar, he led the puzzled gambler out, across the street and a couple of hundred yards up the Oathes reservoir. Digger directed Slim to a seat on the sluice gate. He took a pull on the jug, passed it to Slim and chuckled when he saw the blank questioning on Slim's face.

"Go on, Slim," he grinned, "yew an' I both know they wasn't any Tsawahabitts! Oh, at first, I gotta admit I was taken in; thet gold belt Bomar's got around his middle sure had me jumpin'." He smiled reflectively and retrieved the jug from the gambler's passive hold.

He squinted down the way they had come. "Jest yew keep watchin' thet back room of Dredger's bar. He's gonna come outa there in a mighty big hurry pretty soon!" Keeping his eyes on the Hotel, the big miner went back to his explanation.

"Wal, Bomar forgot he couldn't swim with the belt Dredger made for him. An', when he liked to drown, I got wise an' figured out how to turn the tables on Dredger. Bomar an' me did some minin'. We took about fifty ounces, 'way up above Mount Lassen. Thet's Idaho country an' they's still a few of the redheaded pigmies up there. They's the one's invented thet story 'bout a big giant named Tsawahabitts. They invented it to keep the Piutes out'a thet territory. Them pigmies was the real raiders what captured them huntin' parties. Thet story I told Dredger jest now was part of my plan to nail him an'," Digger pointed a calloused thumb at Dredger's hotel. "He's really nailed. Listen to thet explosion! Lookit him run!"

While Slim gazed, open-mouthed, the back of Dredger's establishment errupted. The boards flew and the rock foundation settled back to earth.

Between gasps of mirth, Digger continued his story. "Bomar an' me, we got us a whole bunch of lead; sure was a big job haulin' it from a broken-down river steamer—guess they used it for ballast. We melted down the lead, bored pockets and filled the pockets with powder an' caps. Then, we painted the lead with thet fifty ounces of gold we mined. Made it jest like Dredger made Bomar's belt!" His massive shoulders shook, tears of mirth were in his sharp eyes. "Yup, that's the way we got us the two bracelets. Made 'em by gollies!"

Digger's glee was infectious. Slim howled. "Then," he chortled, "when Dredger started pounding that gold with a sledgehammer, I mean," he corrected himself, "when he started pounding that lead filled with powder, he hit one of those caps and the whole shebang blew. Right?"

"Ree-ight!" shouted Digger and they were off again. Laughing so hard they had to hold each other in position on their precarious perch but Digger never once loosened his tight grip on the jug.

THE END

WHEN SOIL
is bought by
SIXGUNS
by
Lee Floren

Gambler Bill Langston held no brief for farmers . . . but he didn't approve legalized murder, either!

THE LOAFER looked out the window of the *Black Dog Saloon* and said, "They're fightin', men!"

Gambler Bill Langston glanced up. "Who's fighting?"

"Young Jim Charles and Cliff Weaver!"

The two players at Bill Langston's table made a hurried exit into Wagon Spoke's main-street with the gambler following. They went out into the hot raw Montana sun and stood on the edge of the boot-worn plank-sidewalk and watched.

All of Wagon Spoke was watching.

The two fought in the middle of the dusty street. Bill Langston's blue eyes gave the fighters a quick glance, judged them about even; then he looked at Martha Charles, standing beside the buckboard about one hundred feet beyond the fighters.

The farmer's wife had her hand on her throat, and horror was in her eyes. Bill Langston read this, and judged it based upon fear for her husband. The gambler took his eyes back to the fighting pair.

Cliff Weaver outweighed young Jim Charles by twenty odd pounds, but the reach and youth were on the side of the young farmer, who circled the range-boss who stood with his fists up, his burly head pulled low between his thick shoulders.

Langston thought, *Jim can whip him...* That thought was good.

Then, the gambler looked at Mike Garber, owner of the big Circle N. The cowman stood alone, heavy legs wide, as he watched his foreman and Jim Charles fight. Garber looked up and his eyes met those of Gambler Bill Langston.

Their gazes met momentarily, held; then Mike Garber looked back at the battlers. The cowman's voice was clear and hard. "You claim you're a gamblin' man, Langston. Two to one this rooster cain't whup my range-boss."

Eyes swung, probed Langston. The gambler had never *claimed* he was a gambling man—one who would gamble on anything. Mike Garber was just adding that accusation to make him angry, Bill knew.

Garber, he figured, hated him. Hated him because he was a friend of the Charles'.

Bill Langston said, "I'll take those odds, fellow. Name your amount."

"A hundred bucks, *tinhorn!*"

Tinhorn... A nickname for a crooked gambler... But Bill let the jibe ride, his thin, clean-shaven face expressionless. "Called!"

Mike Garber scowled, shifted his chew to his other cheek, and returned his attention to the fighters.

Bill felt a tug on his coat-sleeve and he looked down into Martha Charles' frightened eyes.

"He's just trying to pick trouble with you, Mr. Langston. He knows you and Jim are long-time friends. He hates anybody who has any regard for a farmer, and he hates you because you like Jim."

Bill nodded.

He watched, face expressionless from long schooling, a wiry, medium-sized man of almost forty. All his life he had been a gambler; he had seen his share of trouble, and, although he disliked trouble, he was never the man to sidestep. He had only been in Wagon Spoke a week.

Down in Wyoming—around Lander—he had seen Old Mack Charles, and Old Mack had said, "The kid got married, Bill. He's up on the Milk River in Montana, homesteadin' out of Wagon Spoke. Married a nice gal, Jimmy did; Martha's a real one."

"That's good."

Old Mack had lain in bed, wrinkled face scowling. "Dunno how good it is, Bill. Word has come to me that a big cowoutfit don't cotton to nesters, an' Jimmy's squattin' on their range. Fella named Mike Garber is causin' trouble for Jimmy, so the grapevine tells me."

Bill had nodded, face somber.

Old Mack had twitched, eyes closed as he fought pain. "This danged arthritis has got me laid up, else I'd head north to side the kid." His eyes had opened and he had looked long at Bill Langston.

Finally Bill had said, "All right, you ol' goat, I'll ride up that way an' look things over."

"Kinda figgered my ol' friend would do just that, Billy boy."

So here he was, watching young Jim fight Garber's range-boss, Cliff Weaver. And it was a hard fight, too.

JIM CIRCLED, and Cliff Weaver turned, body moving on the thick swivel of his hips. Jim sent in a right and Weaver blocked it. Weaver smashed a left into Jim's lips.

The blow was hard, and it stunned Jim.

Weaver moved in, deadly and tough, and Jim hit him, fighting back harder. He pushed Weaver back and Bill saw doubt enter the colorless eyes of Mike Garber.

Martha gasped, "Bill, he'll whip him— Oh, Bill, he's beating him, he is— Oh!"

Cliff Weaver had kneed young Jim. Beaten fairly, he resorted to dirty tactics; Jim had not expected the hard upthrust of the man's thick knee into his groin. The blow doubled the youth and Weaver, beefy face savage and beaten, came in to take advantage of his tactics.

A right smashed into Jim's face, making a loud noise that drew a cry from Martha, who had her hand over her mouth. A left crashed in, sending him back a pace, bending him lower.

Cliff Weaver kneed him again, and Jim was out on his feet, Langston saw. Martha started forward; the gambler grabbed her. "Here, girl, you can't do anything!"

"The dirty, filthy beast! He won't fight fair! Jim had him whipped and —Bill, you'll get into trouble."

Jim Charles had gone down, and Weaver had his boot back to kick the young farmer who twisted with pain, there in the dust. But the boot never landed for Gambler Bill Langston's grip fastened on the range-boss's thick shoulder. The grip turned the Circle N foreman.

"None of that, Weaver!"

"Why, you two-bit tinhorn shyster, I'll give you what I guv this worthless nester! I'll—"

Weaver swung, and Bill's blows came in, clean and sharp. Weaver missed and went back to sit down in the dust, stunned and sick.

Martha hollered, "Bill, watch out —behind you—"

But Bill was watching young Jim go for his gun. The gambler noticed, in that wild moment, that Weaver had twisted, reaching for his weapon. This was going to end in gunsmoke.

Something hit Bill Langston back of the ear. The blow knocked him

forward into blackness, but just before he passed out he heard the roar of guns; then there was nothing but silence.

* * *

FIRST, he saw the woman's face. She had brown hair and she was pretty, and then he recognized her as Elizabeth Shirley. He sat up and discovered he was on the cot in Elizabeth's millinery-shop.

"Take it easy, Bill."

Despite his pounding head, he liked the coolness of her voice. During his week in this town he had squired her to the local dance once and had found out he liked her immensely. Their eyes had met and had told secrets. She had been married once—it had been very unhappy, he had heard—and it had not lasted long. That made them both even on the matrimonial angle.

"Things happen fast," he said.

"Drink this."

He didn't like the taste of the liquid but she made him drink it all. Memory washed back and put his own problems to one side.

"Jim Charles?"

"In Jail."

"Cliff Weaver?"

"Dead... Jim killed him."

Bill put his head between his hands and looked at the floor. "I remember them going for their guns. I guess somebody slugged me from behind with a six-shooter." He touched the swollen spot gingerly. "I remember Martha calling in warning. Did Garber slug me?"

"Yes."

"The charge against Jim?"

"Murder."

The word had an ugly echo that seemed to bounce back and forth across the small room, even though Elizabeth had spoken it in her usual low tone of voice.

"Cliff Weaver reached first."

She mixed another drink, putting the headache powder into the water with a spoon. He grimaced. "This is Mike Garber's town," she reminded. "If Mike says Jim Charles drew first, then Jim drew first."

Langston drank, still grimacing. "These townspeople," Bill said, "are a lot of rats."

"They're not so bad, Bill; they're just afraid. If somebody broke them loose from Garber's grip— Say, what are you trying to do?"

Bill held her and kissed her. "You have to have some pay for getting my carcass off the street." He kissed her again. Her lips were hesitant at first, then yielded and held pressure.

She stepped back with, "Bill Langston!"

"Something I've wanted to do for some days now."

"I hope...nobody saw us."

"I saw you," a youthful voice said from the door.

They turned. Sonny Smith stood there, grinning. Bill flipped him four-bits. A grimy hand caught the flashing coin.

"What did you see, Sonny?"

"Not a darn thing, Bill."

Still smiling, the boy turned and ran for the grocery-store.

* * *

SHERIFF MYERS said, "You can't see him, Langston. Doc's in there patchin' up his sore spots."

"He didn't pull first."

The lawman was as cagey as his shifting eyes. "That's for the jury to decide at his trial; I merely served a warrant that Mike Garber swore out."

Bill Langston knew there was no use arguing with the star-man. The sheriff was a politician: he knew who bought new saddles for his broncs. The gambler asked, "Where's Mike Garber?"

"What'd do you want with Mike?"

"We had a bet," Bill reminded.

Pale eyes studied him, shifted. "Mike should be down to the *Black Dog*, gambler. But walk with light boots."

"A threat?"

"No, not that."

Bill said, "If the pendulum swung against Mike Garber and the Circle N, you'd try to muscle-in with the other bunch, sheriff."

"I ride a middle saddle."

When Langston entered the *Black Dog Saloon*, his quiet smile hid his irritation. He had almost

planted a set of hard knuckles against that sheriff's jaw, but Bill was glad now he had not given way to his sudden desire; he had enough enemies. True, the sheriff was not a friend, but he was not an enemy, either.

Mike Garber was at the bar and he turned, whiskey glass in hand. He put his back to the bar, holding the glass as he watched Bill.

"You owe me some dinero," Bill said.

"How come?"

"Our bet. Is your memory that short?"

"Did Jim Charles whip my man?"

"I say he did. Jim's alive. Weaver's dead."

"We bet on fists, not on guns."

"We bet on a fight," Bill reminded.

Mike Garber watched him with those cold eyes. For years this had been his range, and then one farmer had come, and if he stayed then the wedge would be driven; others would come and stay and free-grass would be no more. "We bet on fists, tinhorn."

"My man had yours whipped."

Garber's eyes pulled down and he said. "You want trouble, huh? Mister, that nester's in jail, an' I'll see he gets hung, sure as hell. Now play wise, fella, an' move on, an' fergit this range."

"An order?"

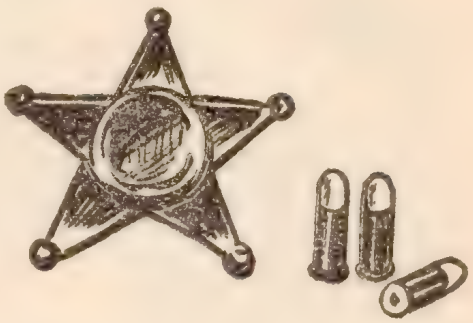
"It is."

Bill Langston said, quietly, "I'm taking over Jim Charles' farm, Garber. I'm running it for him and I might take up a homestead of my own; I've never used my homestead rights."

The saloon was quiet, too quiet.

"Don't do it," Garber murmured.

Langston showed a cynical smile. Once there had been a time when he could have drawn out of this, but that time was gone, now. He remembered Old Mack down in Lander, tied to that bed for the rest of his few days, and he remembered the look in Martha's eyes when she had looked at her husband. And another thought came, and it said, "Remember how you caught that same look



in Elizabeth Shirley's eyes," and that thought drove him into action.

He slapped down Garber's arm. The whiskey splashed and hit the cowman across the face, and it hung there like beads of amber sweat. Garber let his hand go down and rest on his holstered gun.

"You don't pack a gun," Mike Garber said.

Langston's voice showed constraint. "I got fists."

Garber shook his leonine head. "Guns are my way."

"I'll get one," Bill promised.

A man said, "I'll take him for you, Boss." He was squat and tough-looking and he packed two guns. He was Milt Domacam, a Circle N gunhand.

Garber clipped, "I can take care of myself, Milt!"

Domacam muttered something, then moved. Bill looked at Mike Garber, then at the people watching them; he had lost again. He did not pack a gun, and Garber wanted guns. People would say, "That gambler was tough because he didn't tote a pistol. He knew that Garber wouldn't fist-fight, and he hit Garber because of that fact..."

Bill Langston turned and left.

* * *

LAWYER Martin Wilde said, "I can't defend him, Mr. Langston." He looked out the window as if evading the gambler's eyes.

"Might I ask why?"

"I'll give it to you straight. If I bucked Mike Garber, I'd be done in this section; I'd never get another case."

"But if you cleared Jim Charles?"

"I—I can't take his defense, sir. Good day."

Bill Langston walked down the hall, anger inside of him. Outside he met Martha Charles and he asked, "How is Jim taking it?"

"As good as can be...I guess."

The gambler told about trying to hire Lawyer Wilde to defend her husband. Her blue eyes followed him closely. "We can get a lawyer from out of state, Bill." Her lips were steady. "I heard you had a run-in with Garber and he said he was out to get you."

"Talk travels fast in a small town," he murmured.

She was hesitant. "Bill, just because you knew Jim before, and because you know Old Mack— Well, that isn't any sign you should stick out your neck for us, Bill."

"Should I run?" He was slightly cynical.

"Well, Garber's a killer, and Milt Domacam has a bad record, too."

Bill shook his head. He had added it up before, and the answer had been the same; once, perhaps, he could have pulled back, but that moment was past. For added to it all now was the incident in the saloon when he had knocked down Mike Garber's arm. "I can't leave Jim," he said.

She bit her bottom lip, the gesture fitting her puzzlement. He got the impression she understood that more than land was involved now; a man's pride was mixed into this, and that ingredient had made the mixture tougher. "Be careful, Bill."

"I'm riding out to your farm and do the chores," he told her. "You stay in town tonight."

"All right."

He went to his hotel-room and got his gun and buckled it around his slim hips, making the heavy weapon ride just right. He was saddling his bronc in the livery-barn when Elizabeth Shirley said, "I ride with you, Bill."

She sat a neat-looking little sorrel. He thought, *A good-looking bronc and a lovely woman.* She had it bad, he realized; she was afraid that if he rode out to the farm alone either Mike Garber or Milt Domacam or some of the other Circle N men might kill him.

"Your store?"

"At a moment like this, a store doesn't amount to much in a person's thoughts."

HE SWUNG up and they rode out of town, their saddlers at a running-walk. Sheriff Myers sat on the bench in front of his office and he watched them but he did not lift his hand in greeting.

Elizabeth said, "Garber and Domacam left town about thirty minutes ago, Bill."

"Right after I had the run-in with them?"

She nodded.

He gave that thought, trying to fit it into this puzzle, but there was no vacant space. Yet it seemed odd that the two should leave at such a moment, for the center of this trouble was in Wagon Spoke town.

Elizabeth said, "They're out to kill you, Bill."

Her hand was on her saddle-horn. His hand came over and settled on hers. "It might not come to that," he consoled. He was fibbing to build up her strength, and she was aware of that.

"It would be tough," she said, "to find the man you want, and then when a person found him to lose him."

She was close to tears.

He put his arm around her and their horses walked close together, seemingly a part of this. He kissed her full mouth and her lidded eyes, and then she was sobbing. They rode on that way, a great sickness in him; finally her sobs stopped and she wiped her eyes with her handkerchief.

"Bill, that was nice."

Bill thought, *A man can never understand one of them,* but he did not put this into words. They talked about things, and he found himself telling her about his past.

"I was married once before. It didn't catch, only lasted a few months. I've heard since Jean married again and has four kids."

"Never caught with me either," she said, smiling now.

"Two little lambs," Bill Langston said, "thrown to the wolves."

He had meant it as a joke. It wasn't; it fit two situations too well, and one of them was the present.

Elizabeth said, "Riders coming, Bill."

They bestrode lathered broncs, and Mike Garber curbed his horse, the animal rising in protest against the cruelty of the spade-bit. Milt Domacam folded his hands across his saddle-horn and watched and said nothing. Once he wet his lips, and that was his only movement.

Garber said, "One hour, gambler; I'll give you that much time." His watch lifted and he turned it and Bill read the hands. "By that time, be headin' out."

Milt Domacam was looking at Elizabeth. She apparently did not notice his devouring gaze, for she looked at Garber. Domacam looked at her ankles, ran his eyes along her thigh, then across her to her face. It was then that he licked his lips.

"I'll be in town," Langston said.

Garber looked at Domacam, that small smile on him, but Domacan was watching Elizabeth, that hunger in his eyes.

Garber said, "You're not that much of a fool, are you?"

"I guess I am."

Garber said, "Come on, Milt," and they loped toward Wagon Spoke.

Elizabeth asked, "Now where have they been?"

Bill looked toward the Charles' homestead, about three miles away and in a small basin. He saw the smoke then and he said, "I think I know where they've been."

Together they raced toward the fire. They got on the ridge and reined in, for they were too late; fire had licked the buildings below and whipped them into red coals.

Horse panted, rigs rising and falling with their laboring flanks. Bill turned on stirrups and said, "So that's where they were... This rips the lid open, girl."

Elizabeth was silent, teeth white as she bit her bottom lip.

Bill seemed to be speaking to himself. "Jim Charles will never stand trial; Garber'll see to that."

He looked at her. "They'll—they'll murder him in jail?"

"It could be done."

"How about ol' Abe?"

Abe Worthington was an old gent who did chores for the Charles' family. Jim had told Bill the old man had been sick in bed with rheumatism.

Bill said, "He might have got out."

They rode down the slope, horses braced against the pull of gravity, and came to the burned-down buildings. Abe Worthington had not got out of the house, his bedstead was a twisted, grotesque thing, there in the cooling coals, and he was not nice to look at, his body lying in the ashes.

Elizabeth said, "Oh, my God, Bill!"

"Never had a chance," Bill murmured. "Maybe they didn't even know he was inside."

"Either way, they're killers!"

Bill said, "But try to prove it in court! Nobody saw those two light this fire. We have only circumstantial evidence, nothing more; and even if we had seen Garber and Domacam burn these buildings, I doubt very much if our testimony would convict them."

Elizabeth said, "Only a gun, Bill."

"That's it, now."

There was nothing they could do here. The work had been done, and Old Abe Worthington had died. Silently both turned their broncs and rode toward Wagon Spoke.

Neither spoke much. When they

"Mike Garber is trying to claim that Jim murdered Cliff Weaver..."

did talk it was of irrelevant matters. They came to the livery-barn and Elizabeth said, "I'll take my horse to my barn," and she gave him a long, calm look.

He thought, *She's made of the real stuff,* and that thought was warm and satisfying. But he said only, "Be good, Elizabeth."

She turned her bronc and rode away.

* * *

SHERIFF MYERS sat on his bench and whittled and said nothing. Across the street Lawyer Martin Wilde looked out his window. A cur started across the street, a flea caught him; he sat and scratched. Lawyer Wilde met Bill's eyes and the shyster moved back into the gloom of his office.

Sheriff Myers folded his jackknife and pocketed it and walked away. The alley took him and hid him.

The dog sat, exhausted from his efforts. He sat there and looked at the town, and then scratched again, this time using the other hind leg.

Lawyer Wilde came back to his window.

Bill Langston headed for the *Black Dog;* the hour had moved itself into eternity, and the town knew this, too. They stood in doorways and watched, but none stood on the street; they watched out of windows of stores and other business-establishments. Only Bill and the cur were on the street.

The dog looked at Bill and the gambler said, "How are you, pup?"

The dog let his red tongue run out, but he sat there and did not move.

Behind him Milt Domacam said, "Turn around, you tinhorn!"

Langston stopped and moved closer to the building. Domacam had come out of the Mercantile and he stood with his legs wide and his hand on his gun.

Domacam said, "The hour is up."

Bill knew that Mike Garber would move into this play, too. Garber was not going to sit back and let his gunman handle this; he wanted the glory; Garber had his own rep to maintain.

Bill felt the rough log wall behind his back. His voice was low when he said, "I can tell time."

"I didn't know you had that much brains!"

Cynicism there, a stupid sort of contempt. Nothing smart, nothing intelligent about the words—just the words of an ignorant killer. Other men would die, and other men had to die, but Domacam had never tied his own life into the endless scheme; therefore he was arrogant in his ignorance.

Bill said, "Well?"

Mike Garber came out of the *Black Dog*, across the street. He came to the middle of the street and Bill watched, wishing he had help. Domacam flanked him on the right, standing about a hundred feet away; Garber was ahead of him, about the same distance. They made a triangle and he was at the deadly apex.

Garber said, "Domacam is not in on this, fella! He's just standin' by to see there's fair play."

"That's a lie," Bill said.

Now a fourth person moved into the street, and Bill saw the rifle in Elizabeth's hands. Mike Garber did not see the woman and Milt Domacam hissed. "Behind you, boss! She's got a rifle."

Bill called, "Go back, Elizabeth."

If she heard, she gave no sign. Domacam put that crude, hungry look against her, and he wet his lips again. Bill repeated, "Go back."

She said, "I'll take Domacam, Bill."

Domacam said, "I'll take your carcass off the street, woman!" He looked at Mike Garber and Garber was scowling; a woman had upset a trap and it had closed on him—there were no odds in his favor now.

Garber nodded.

ELIZABETH shot at that moment, and her bullet missed. Domacam snarled something, for a woman had shot at him; that gave him license to shoot in return. Bill had terror in him, draining him, and he went back.

He thought, "Garber shot me."

He was down, and he didn't know how he got there. But his gun was up across his forearm and dust stabbed up and hid his front sight. He found Mike Garber, and he remembered shooting twice. He remembered Garber walking ahead, pistol hanging from his fingers, and he remembered Mike Garber screaming, "No—no more—I'm—"

Then dust choked Garber, for he lay on his mouth. And Bill realized that there were no more shots. He got to his hands and knees, sick inside, and he looked to where Milt Domacam had stood. Domacam was there, but he was not standing; he was sitting down and screaming in fear. His gun lay about ten feet away and Elizabeth was walking down on him, her rifle on him.

"You dirty, dirty hog!"

Bill said, "Don't kill him."

The woman turned and said, "You all right, Bill?" The question seemed out of place. Bill got to his feet and said, "Look, I can stand."

She went down then, like a lass-rope had caught her ankles, and pulled her feet our from under her. And only then did Milt Domacam stopped screaming. Bill was beside her, his broken ribs forgotten, and only when the medico said, "She's just fainted," did he feel his own pain.

He turned and stumbled toward the medico's office. Lawyer Wilde caught him and said, "I'll take that case, Bill," and Bill said, "Get out of my way." But Wilde still held him and helped him on the doc's table.

Sheriff Myers said, "I'm resignin' my office an' leavin' town."

Wilde snapped, "Good deal. Make tracks."

Bill laid back, hands clasped behind his head. Doc came in and said, "Garber is dead," and he added, "Milt Domacam has a broken leg. They toted him to the hotel for bed. Now you, Bill?"

"My ribs. Broken, I think."

Doc probed.

"Where's Elizabeth?"

"I kept her outside." Doc studied him. "You want her in here?"

"I'd sure appreciate it," Langston said.

THE END

HOME is the HUNTER

by

W. F. Bragg

Andy Irons tried to tell himself that he wasn't interested in the Kitcham girl. But Andy's partner, old John High Eagle, knew better. And the red man was determined to help his paleface brother, even against Andy's will!

THE MOMENT that Andy Irons rode out of the timber ahead of his meat-laden pack string and saw the yellow-haired girl down in the sunny clearing, he knew that he had ended his free life as a mountain hunter and trader.

She was bending over a camp fire in front of a half-built sod house, busy with frying pans and dutch ovens. The soft mountain wind carried a fragrant odor of fresh biscuits baking, the sort a man never got in a high country hunting camp.

Andy frowned, checking his spotted pony on the edge of a field of golden stubble betokening a grain crop lately harvested. Home-cooked food was just another bait to lure a mountain man into a trap. Lures like blue eyes, and hair that gleamed under the Wyoming sun like a Black Hills nugget, lithe long-limbed grace outlined by a wind whipped gown of faded blue.

He didn't wish to talk to this Elmiry Kitcham again; he had been wary as a wolf after the first meeting, the month before, when he headed with old John into the Big Horns. Her father had moved in here with his slow oxen after hostile Indians had been penned on distant reservations. He had driven his homestead stakes around this land which Andy and John had occupied as a snug winter camp. Old Kitcham had plainly indicated to the easy-going mountain men that he regarded their sort as loafers and ne'er-do-wells. They wouldn't settle down and drive their stakes like honest plowmen; they were all high livers when they had money in their pokes, as great a menace to women as to wild game.

Andy didn't fear old Kitcham nor resent the loss of his winter camp. Up in the hills he had laid vast plans with old John for a winter hunt on the upper Yellowstone as this country seemed to be crawling over with settlers. But he couldn't forget the blue eyes and yellow hair of Elmira as he sat in the evening by his camp fire. And he knew, as he crossed the clearing toward the boundary stake-and-rider fence along the creek where an old belled milk cow grazed, that if he didn't hurry on, likely there'd be no wintering on the Yellowstone.

Hearing the soft crunch of hoofs in the stubble, the girl stood up by the fire and shaded her eyes with her hand. She didn't call out but Andy halted his horse as though she had put a bullet through it.

Old John, riding along at the rear of the pack train, throwing rocks at laggards, could read sign as well as any Crow who lived in the Big Horn country. His black eyes flashed angrily as he saw his young partner

fling up his right hand in the halt signal.

"We'll drop off a haunch of elk for these Kitchams," Andy called. "Old man's so busy with his crop, likely he ain't taken time off for a hunt."

"Kitcham say last time we go by he no like Injuns or whites who trail with 'em," John warned. "Sun standin' near noon. Pretty hot too. Mebbe meat spoil we hang around. Better hustle down to fort."

JOHN had painted himself up and his black buffalo horse for the triumphant return to the new fort on the Piney. After the dealing with the trader, the partners would enjoy a leisurely spree, then stock up for the Yellowstone hunt. This halt by Andy revived all the suspicions John had entertained in the high country of what had come over his young partner since Andy had laid eyes on the girl.

"Come on," Andy said cheerfully. "I smell hot biscuits on the wind. You ever throw a lip over a home-cooked biscuit, John? Beats the bait you and me been eatin' for the last month."

John grunted but he turned the pack string and followed Andy toward the soddy. They had gone through peril together during the years they roved the mountains before the settlers came in. They had killed their buffalo, trapped their beaver, stood off roving Sioux and Arapahoes; it didn't seem that anything would break up their partnership until Kitcham moved in to the clearing with his daughter.

"Yellow hair heap bad medicine for mountain man," John growled, and threw a rock at a pack horse so sharply that the startled animal broke into a gallop. "Mebbe winter hunt all blowed up!"

As Andy rode toward the girl, he could hear the ring of an axe in the pinery above the clearing. Logs were piled at the end of the soddy apparently to repair the roof which had caved in. Andy frowned. He had built the soddy but deserted it when a warm chinook wind suddenly melted heavy midwinter snow causing the dirt roof to collapse. Soddys were all right for the great plains where snow didn't drift so violently as in the mountains. But up here, settlers required tight log cabins or they would freeze up before spring.

Checking his horse, he reached for his tattered hat. He had scorched and broken the brim-fanning fires. His buckskins were weather-stained, and cockle burrs clung to the thrums that edged his shoulders and sleeves. His hair, coarse and black as his pony's mane, hung to his collar. His eyes looked almost white in a faced tanned as brown as his saddle.

"Stopped by," said Andy gruffly, for he found speech difficult, "to drop off some fresh meat for you. Figured your father was so busy with his oats he wouldn't have time for a hunt."

The Kitcham girl wasn't pretty. The sun and storms of a summer on the frontier had reddened her face and parched her lips. Her gown was patched, and faded from outdoor work; but she was lithely built and springy on her feet as an antelope.

She ran the blue eyes which had bothered the mountain man over Andy in his greasy buckskins, the cavalcade of hip-slouched ponies, the old Indian on the buffalo horse. With parted lips, she pondered her next move remembering that her father believed a good Indian was a dead one and pale-faces who travelled with them were not any better.

She hadn't been long in the west but she had learned the frontier law of hospitality. Lowering her eyes, she wiped soot off her hands with ragged apron and said shyly to Andy, "Thanks for the meat. Paw hasn't had much time for hunting. Just flailed out his oats. He'll be down for dinner soon with Red Pelkey. You'll eat with us?"

The way a girl lowered her eyes and spoke so softly should not thicken a man's tongue and put a strange lightness in his brain. Suddenly Andy felt baffled by the Kitcham girl and curiously angry with her. He didn't wish to talk with her; he wanted to turn his pony and ride away from the clearing while time remained. But he had offered meat.

He swung and called back to John High Eagle.

"Open a kyack and cut off a haunch of elk. Hang it up in that tree where it'll be above fly line."

AS JOHN got off his buffalo horse, a yoke of oxen trudged around a corner of the soddy. A squatty-built old man—Red Pelkey—followed, urging on the patient beasts with a hickory goad. A tall fellow, in a bright red blanket coat, trailed after the huge log which the oxen were dragging, whistling merrily, toting a broad-axe over his shoulder.

"You and your Injun friend back again?" questioned the old ox-goader. Heavy gray beard masked his hard cheeks. His small brown eyes gleamed with a red light beneath bristling brows.

"Headin' for the fort. Got more than enough meat. Droppin' some off for you, Kitcham," answered Andy.

"I got money to pay for the meat since I sold my oats to the soldiers. Before that Injun hangs it up in the tree, name your price. I ain't anxious to pay too much for it. I can get along on salt horse and the like until I get time for a hunt."

"Paw," the girl flashed out, turning on her father, "he's *giving* us the meat, not asking pay for it. I think it's right nice of him. I'm powerful tired of salt meat and fat bacon. I could do with a right nice elk steak. I've invited Andy and his friend to eat dinner with us."

"So you're even callin' him by his first name now?" Kitcham growled angrily. He turned and gave the girl a push with his broad hand. "Get inside the soddy," he commanded. "Quit your pesterin' around after these young bucks who ride with Injuns. I've told you often they don't mean you no good. Go on inside now!"

"Paw!" she cried out, backing away from his threatening hand. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, talkin' that way. Andy's been right polite to me. 'Course we only met twice."

"Shut up, Elmiry!" roared Kitcham, taking a step toward her. "I told you! Get into that soddy!"

Andy came off his pony in a flash. He reached toward the haft of his long hunting knife which hung from his belt in a beaded holster. "Take your hands off that girl!" he spat out.

Old Kitcham faced him, popeyed with amazement. He raised the heavy ox goad.

"That girl's my own daughter!" he roared. "Who are you to be interferin' with us? Get off my land with your red Injun friend! Get—before I bust open your head with my ox goad!"

Andy felt the swift rage which had gripped him, drain away as he faced Kitcham. He allowed the half-bared knife to drop down into its holster. The girl had covered her face with a corner of her apron and was weeping softly. Red Pelkey, resting his axe against the soddy wall, stepped to her and placed an arm around her shoulders.

It appeared to Andy that her pliant body in the blue gown responded instantly to Pelkey's caress. Kitchan spoke the truth; Andy had exceeded his rights. If she needed defense, let Red Pekley undertake it. He shrugged and reached for his stirrup.

AS HE swung into his saddle, he saw that John High Eagle was hanging the haunch of elk from a low limb in the small pine which shaded one end of the soddy. "Come on, John," he called. "Let's hit the trail!"

"Take your meat with you!" snarled Kitcham. "I don't want to be beholden to you. I've plowed my ground and sold my oats an' don't need charity. I haven't wasted my time loafin' around in the hills all summer!"

"You're usin' the logs me and High Eagle cut out a year ago for a winter cabin," Andy retorted. "But you're welcome to 'em. Although I'd go ahead and build a real cabin that would turn winter weather instead of foolin' around with that caved in soddy."

"Logs was cut on gover'ment land that I took up; they belong to me. If I figured I owed you for 'em, I'd shell out. But I don't! Call your tame Injun an' drift!"

"Come on, John!" said Andy. "He don't want the meat!"

But John High Eagle lashed the elk meat to the tree. He stepped over to his black buffalo horse and picked up the trailing reins. He grunted to Kitcham, "You heap good trader, I hear. You like trade for this pony?"

Kitcham's eyes glistened as he looked at the horse. He knew a fine animal when he saw one. But he answered angrily, "All I need a horse for is trips to the fort. I got nothin' to trade that an Injun would want." He scratched his beard then reached inside the soddy doorway. He drew out a heavy single-shot army musket. "Maybe you trade horse for gun," he said.

"Got plenty gun," said John High Eagle. He opened the beaded waist pouch where he carried his big medicine and his red sandstone pipe. He took out a handful of glistening colored beads. "These for boot!" he went on.

"Horse and beads?" asked Kitcham. "But what for?"

"Yellow-haired woman!"

Kitcham stood amazed, small eyes round and hard as balls of beef suet. Then his face turned blood red above the grizzled cheek line of his ragged beard. He took a step toward the Indian, swinging the musket by its barrel. The stock would have struck High Eagle's head if the man hadn't dodged the blow and leaped backward toward his buffalo horse.

"Insultin' me!" roared Kitcham. "Wantin' to trade a horse for my daughter! Tryin' to get a white girl for his tepee!"

"Not my tepee!" High Eagle said between his teeth. He had whipped out his knife and planted himself by his horse daring the settler to advance on him. "Not for my tepee! Want yellow-haired woman for Andy. He heap sick for woman. Want to build his own tepee! No good for hunt any more. Can't hit anything. Think all time about woman. *Heap sick*!"

Astounded, Andy shouted to High Eagle. "Get on your fool pony!"

He heard the loud laughter of Red Pelkey, saw that the girl had dropped her apron and was looking at him. So High Eagle had known all along why he was off his feed in the hills. He felt shamed and bewildered.

"You put the Injun up to this!" shouted old Kitcham. "All this soft talk and meat givin' was just to corner up my daughter!"

Andy put both hands on his saddle horn for they were shaking; he didn't wish to reveal the rage that was burning him. But he dared not look at the girl or Pelkey.

He gave Kitcham a flat hard answer. "I don't want the girl." He turned his horse toward the crossing.

"Take along your danged meat!" Kitcham roared.

"Eat it or let it rot!" Andy fired back over his shoulder as his horse splashed into the ford.

He was up among the lodge-pole pines riding down the valley trail before he heard old John driving the pack string across the creek. He didnt h'alt for a friendly pow wow; the laughter of Red Pelkey still rang in his ears. But he had mastered his wrath by the time he rode into a grassy clearing a short distance off the trail above the post trader's store. A man shouldn't let himself go over a fool settler and his daughter.

HE MET High Eagle with a twisted smile on his face.

"We'll camp here. Plenty wood and water. I'll take the meat down to the trader while you fix things up for the night. Come daybreak, we're headin' north to the upper Yellowstone. There, we'll hole in for a good winter hunt."

High Eagle's eyes brightened; then he shook his head glumly. He sat down and took his red stone pipe from his belt pouch. It had been the partners' custom to smoke over some important plan. "You no go to

Yellowstone," said John, shaking his head.

"Why not?"

"You goin' back to woman with yellow hair."

Andy's rage burned anew. "Not much. I'll buy our grubstake from the trader. We'll pick it up when we go by in the morning."

John put away the pipe. He arose slowly and faced his partner. "Maybe you heap mad with me," he said. "Old man get mad. Everybody get mad about trade for woman with yellow hair." He grunted. "Buffalo horse worth maybe three—four woman."

"Nobody's mad at you, John. The old man didn't sabe that warriors trade good horses for wives."

"Somethin' wrong with you. Can't shoot, no eat, stay awake. You heap sick; you want woman with yellow hair. You go back. Hunt on Yellowstone all off!"

Andy mounted and galloped away from camp. He shook the pack ponies into a hard gallop. He was short with the genial trader when he sold the meat and turned in his list of supplies. "I'll pick 'em up in the morning," he said. "Going to the Yellowstone."

"Watch your hair, Andy. There's reports on renegades raidin' along the hills. Some of these settlers have been robbed. A homesteader was scalped last week down at the end of the mountain."

"What's a settler got that would interest renegades?'

The trader clinked coins in a buckskin poke. "Gold! The first crops of oats and hay and garden sass are fetching big prices. Old Man Kitcham freighted his crop in a couple days ago and took around a thousand dollars back home." The trader winked. "Time you was settlin' down. Kitcham, they say, has a right pretty girl."

"Red Pelkey thinks so. He's up there all togged up in a fancy coat like a bridegroom. Helpin' old Kitcham roof his soddy."

The trader frowned. "Never heard of Pelkey doin' much hard work. He hangs around the post mostly, tryin' to cheat stray Injuns out of pelts. He don't adventure much in the timber; too many war whoops anxious to collect his red hair. Same goes for his running mate, Lepard."

Andy thought about Red Pelkey and his partner, Lepard, as he drove the ponies with their empty kyacks back to the camp. Pelkey had always been a smooth talker and trader among men who did not know him. Let him bilk old Kitcham out of his money. Take the girl if he so desired. Andy didn't care now; he was heading for the Yellowstone in the morning, light of heart and fancy free.

But when he shouted for old John, the man didn't answer. Nor did a search of the camp reveal a trace of John or his black buffalo pony. Andy discovered a heelprint made by a moccasin in damp earth near the spring by the trail. That was all.

When he knelt and studied the print, he cleared awayhalf-dried mud. Beneath he saw the red stone bowl of John's pipe. It had been broken off its stem, ground into the earth by a moccasin-clad heel as though in bitter anger.

The partners had made a ceremony of smoking this sacred pipe when they held a pow wow over grave decisions. But Andy had hurried away, angered, from this camp; he had resented High Eagle's belief that he would not go for the winter hunt, that he would, instead, go back to the Kitcham clearing for the woman with the yellow hair.

The broken pipe then was old John's way of informing him that friends had finally parted. Andy arose and brushed the dirt off his knees. He looked around the silent clearing, a sense of vague alarm tensing his lean frame. He was recalling, too, how High Eagle had resented the anger and the laughter that had met his offer to trade a valuable horse for the Kitcham girl.

A proud warrior like old John might return to seek vengeance on Kitcham and Pelkey.

ANDY SHOOK off his feeling of fear as he mounted. Let old Kitcham defend himself against John High Eagle; it was none of Andy's concern. Of course, the old man was the girl's father. It would be hard on an orphaned girl if winter caught her in the snow-bound hills with only a broken down sod house for shelter. But perhaps Red Pelkey would take her down to the fort. Andy curled his lips.

But suddenly he discovered that he was turning his pony toward the trail that led up the valley. That he wasn't halting even to pull the packs off the other horses and hobble them for the night's grazing.

Then he began to believe that old John had ridden away from camp in a huff, dropped the pipe, and broken it in a blind rage.

Andy reined down his horse. He sat his saddle, staring up the dim trail that meandered through the dark pines.

The pipe was sacred to High Eagle; it was part of his big medicine. Indians seldom lost the contents of the medicine bag. That brought tribal disgrace, in some cases, expulsion from the tribe.

He began to think that the pipe had been placed on the ground, deliberately broken by a moccasined heel, as a sign from one partner to another that a camp had been rudely invaded, a friendship parted by force.

Since he hadn't met John between the camp and the trader's store, it appeared certain that High Eagle had gone up the valley toward the Kitchams. Old John was leading his friend back to the yellow-haired woman.

Andy half-wheeled his horse; he had sworn he wouldn't return. Small objects glittered where a stray ray of evening sunlight slanted down on a bed of pine needles. Andy reined down, bent from his saddle.

The objects were colored beads from John's pouch, beads similar to those he had offered Kitcham as boot in the proposed trade for the girl. They marked a fork where a narrow path made by deer entered the main trail. Ahead of the fork, Andy saw the fresh tracks of horses. One set of prints had been made by John's buffalo horse. Andy recognized them easily for he had often tracked runaway ponies in the mountains. Another rider, from the sign, was with John; had High Eagle encountered a friend while Andy was at the traders place? The latter had warned of renegades haunting the hills, of settlers murdered and robbed. Kitcham had gold money at his place.

The robbery of Kitcham might satisfy the wounded pride of John High Eagle.

But High Eagle would not blaze a trail with the contents of his medicine bag to guide his partner if he planned a raid.

John High Eagle had blazed the trail because he wanted Andy to return to the Kitcham clearing; he was a stubborn old man but he had stood shoulder to shoulder with Andy Irons in many a tight spot. Andy told himself that he would never go back to aid a girl who, apparently, already had a protector. But he would break any vow to answer the call of a friend.

So Andy Irons returned to the Kitcham clearing in cold blood, as he firmly believed, to solve the riddle of a trail blazed with medicine pipe and beads. But deep in his heart was a warm belief that he would again set eyes on the girl with the yellow hair.

He rode cautiously, dismounted when he reached the crossing and led his pony across the Piney. He drew his Henry rifle from the rawhide scabbard, and tied the horse to a sapling before he crawled toward the stake-and-rider fence that bounded the lower edge of Kitcham's place.

Squirming under the fence, he snaked his way through the tangle of brush that grew along the split rails. Near at hand he could hear the tinkling of a bell where the old milk cow grazed. The sun was low in the west over the Big Horns. A

A deep friendship had sprung up between Andy and John High Eagle.

soft wind droned through the tops of tall pines. He heard, behind him, the lazy chuckling of Piney Creek. Here was the evening peace of the high country.

Or it was until Andy parted the brush and looked out on the clearing. Knee-high rye grass grew between the thicket and the beaten earth in front of the old sod house. Andy saw the yoke of oxen standing at the far end of the building.

THE HAUNCH of elk still hung from the lone pine tree where High Eagle had tied it above fly line.

Lashed to the trunk of the tree by many rounds of rawhide lariats, Andy saw the girl and her father. Not far distant, Red Pelkey sat on the ground with his hands tied to a house log. The long barrel of the army musket lay near Red; the wooden stock had been shattered on the log.

A man in paint and buckskins stepped from the soddy doorway. He wore a breech clout. He threatened old Kitcham with a hand gun. The girl fought against the ropes that bound her as her father stared into the muzzle of the pistol.

"You say you hide money in house!" the painted gunman growled harshly. "We hunt hard! No can find. You tell us where 'bouts in house. Or we kill you all!"

"I ain't telling' you none!" Kitcham blazed. "You dirty renegade—you don't get none of my money!"

Reaching down, the gunman seized one of the girl's long yellow braids. He tugged until she cried out in pain. The renegade laughed and said to Kitcham, "I got knife too. Maybe you think more of gold than girl's yellow hair!"

Red Pelkey cried hoarsely to old Kitcham, "Tell him where you hid the money! Do you think more of money than your daughter?"

Kitcham groaned. He struggled but the lariat bound him tightly to the tree. The gunman holstered his gun and reached for his knife.

"Talk fast, Kitcham!" Pelkey was shouting. "For the sake of your daughter! Where's the gold cached?"

"Talk fast!" warned the knifer, bending over the girl.

But he straightened and swung sharply at a sound behind him where the tall rye-grass grew thickly. He saw that it was the bell on the cow. She was grazing through the rye-grass toward the soddy.

Old Kitcham said hoarsely. "I cached the poke of gold up the chimney."

"If you lie," said the man with the knife, "I come out and collect your daughter's scalp!" He sheathed the knife, again drew his pistol, and slouched back into the soddy.

From the edge of the rye-grass patch, Andy sped on soundless moccasins toward the end of the soddy where the captives were tied. He trailed his long rifle. He had not dared fire a shot or make an approach while one of the renegades stayed inside the soddy; Andy had turned the old cow toward the house, crawled by her side, prodding her forward. Thus he came to the narrowest space between good cover and the home of the Kitchams.

Red Pelkey sought to gain his feet at Andy's approach but the rope dragged him back to the log. Red opened his mouth; before he could yell, Andy knocked him flat across the log with his rifle stock. Red lay sprawled and silent.

The girl stared at Andy, wide-eyed with fear. Her father spat through his ragged beard, "So you're one of them renegades too! Your friend's inside with the one who wanted to scalp my daughter. They're rootin' around in the chimney for my money. Go in an' help 'em!" He licked his dry lips with his tongue. He panted like a dog after a hard run. "But you better kill us all before you leave! Otherwise you'll be *mud forever* in these mountains."

Andy faced the girl. "Talk fast," he whispered. "They got cover. They could easy shoot us down through that window by the chimney. Just what happened here?"

"You said you weren't coming back," she whispered. Somehow her eyes were no longer fearful. "But youre here. *You're here!*"

"What happened?" Andy insisted. "Who's in the house?"

SHE TOLD him that two painted men had jumped Red Pelkey in the timber. While her father was goading the oxen down to the soddy with a log. The man with the knife had brought Red down to the house, put a gun on Kitcham and the girl when they tried to resist. He had disarmed them, broken the musket, tied them to the tree and log. Then he had gone back to the pines and returned with a painted comrade who had led him into the soddy. They had dug there for Kitcham's gold but failed to find it.

"What did you hit Pelkey for?" Kitcham demanded.

"He opened his mouth to yell," said Andy. "I got to root 'em out of that soddy without gettin' hurt. Otherwise, we can check all our bets for keeps."

He heard voices inside the soddy, and fumbling sounds where the renegades were searching in the mud and stone chimney which had been built against the end wall of the soddy.

"Root 'em out!" he said again. "As they come through the door on the run, I might be able to pick 'em off!"

He seized the end of the heavy chain used to drag logs from the timber. He thrust the huge iron hook attached to it through the jutting opening where the wall had sagged away from the chimney. He used his rifle barrel as a goad to stir the sleepy oxen to full action.

"You'll cave in the roof!" snarled Kitcham.

"I hope so," snapped Andy. And jabbed the rifle barrel into the ribs of the nigh ox.

"Gee up!" he yelled.

The oxen stirred, rolled their massive heads. They hated to move for they did not recognize the command of their master. Andy jabbed the ox a second time. They had heard his shout to the oxen within the soddy. They were coming out.

"Gee up!" he stormed.

The chain tightened. The oxen lumbered forward. Mud and rocks of the chimney gave way. The end of a heavy roof leg rolled slowly off the top of the soddy wall.

Two painted men sprang through the doorway as the log crashed at their heels. One ran free-armed and held a gun. He whipped around the corner of the cabin. He threw forward his pistol, preparing to fire on

Andy as the latter leaped away from the oxen.

ANDY'S RIFLE was long for close range fighting; he dropped it and reached for his skinning knife as he ran in under the painted man's gun.

He had come back after all to the clearing on Piney Creek. But at this moment, charging a cocked gun, it didn't seem to Andy that he would stay long.

The second renegade, who had leaped from the cabin to escape the collapsing roof, suddenly flung himself against the man with the pistol. He couldn't move easily for his wrists were loosely tied to his belt. But he raised a mighty war whoop as he jarred his target so sharply that the bullet went over Andy's head. And then, of course, the mountain man got home with the knife.

There wasn't much old Kitcham could say when Andy bent and wiped paint off the fallen renegade's face revealing white skin.

"A man named Lepard," said Andy. "The partner of your friend, Red Pelkey. Red came here to help you so he could locate the gold. He found out it was inside the cabin but not that it was cached in the chimney. If he'd found that out at first, you'd all be dead—includin' John High Eagle here."

"They take me," explained High Eagle. "Make everybody think you and me come for old man's money. I step on pipe. Dump some beads at trail fork. I know you come back when you see that sign. "He turned and grinned at old Kitcham. "How about trade now?"

Kitcham grunted and looked toward the girl and Andy who were standing very near each other gazing at the wrecked sod house. "Reckon the trade's out of our hands," he said. "Looks like you lost a partner."

Andy was saying to the Kitcham girl. "A soddy's no good in these mountains. But don't worry; me and High Eagle will run up a good log cabin before snow flies."

John High Eagle shrugged and said wistfully. "He come back for keeps; no winter hunt on Yellowstone."

THE END

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SPORTS

Big Boss of the Bitter Roots

by Harold F. Cruishank

The Ranger lifted his rifle at the lion.

Old Professor Greening wanted some fine specimens for his zoological exhibits, but Jim Steele didn't cotton to the killing of Bok, king of the wild goats.

HIS PATRIARCHAL beard flowing in the evening breeze, Bok, king of all the wild goats in the Bitterroots mountain country, ambled on toward his favorite salt-lick.

A kid bleated and scampered out of old Bok's way. Bok grunted contemptuously, satisfied that he was still the big boss of the high country.

At the lick, a flat sand-and-clay patch, he got down to his knees and tore up ground with his dagger-like horns. The kids of the band had been cavorting around, none too careful where their droppings had been placed.

Bok snuffled and shook his head before at last he began to tongue the newly-turned earth... He took time out to champ his jaws, twisting his lower jaw from side to side like an old man working on a cud of eating tobacco...

He stretched his hind legs out by

turns, yawned luxuriously then flicking traces of earth from his chops, he minced along past a small spring to an overhanging clump of scrub mountain brush where he browsed on his favorite, tender shoots.

Suddenly he whirled, freezing, his eyes alive with the flame of alertness. Bok had caught a signal from a nanny at a level above the spring. It was a danger signal, and although Bok roamed the craglands alone at this season of the year especially, never once did he fail to respond to a distress call from the little band of nannies, kids and young bucks.

When the soft evening breeze shifted, Bok's nose wrinkled, then suddenly, with no preliminary planning or bunching, he sprang, a vertical leap of over four feet to a ledge above the spring. Again he caught a blatted cry from an old nanny and again he leaped. Now he turned on a narrow shelf no wider, it seemed, than his own body width. He walked sharply with a sureness of foot no other creature could boast or attempt to emulate.

In the half light he cocked his head, then sprang. It was a terrific leap which he could not expect to complete and land four-footed, but his front feet caught over the rim of outcropping and Bok pulled himself to the level at which stood huddled his band, quivering as they sniffed the dread scent of gray wolves.

UP INTO the heights, using slide tracks and old game trails had come Yan, the barren old gray wolf leader and one of her gaunt male followers. It had taken them days to reach this forbidding goat country, but the tang of kid scent had urged them on. Here was opportunity to kill swiftly and satisfyingly. Though she invaded the hunting grounds of grizzly and cougar, she had sniffed contemptuously at whatever whiffs of these enemies she had traced. In her own realm, below the timber line, Yan reigned supreme, by the law of her great fangs, speed, and power in battle.

Now Bok, the king billy, caught the yellow flash of the big she-wolf's eyes. His attention was held by her as she crouched at the edge of an overhanging shrub which clung and somehow thrived on a sheer cliff face.

Suddenly there was action! Yan's follower sprang from the shadows. A kid bleated piteously as he went down, his neck fatally bitten.

An old nanny, Bok's chief consort, rushed valiantly, but Bok was in ahead of her. As the male wolf rose to meet the nanny, it was his undoing, for deadly black spears packing all the power of Bok's great strength, impaled him.

Grunting, the big billy heaved. Twisting his strong neck, he sent the disemboweled wolf creature spinning out over the rimrock. But Yan, the she-wolf struck! Fangs tore through Bok's heavy coat, slashing at his shoulder flesh, but he swung his head and smashed the big gray killer from him. Together now, Bok and the old nanny rushed. Their heads struck simultaneously, but Yan had been whisking her lithe body away. Bok's head caught her a glancing blow in the afterparts slewing her around, but she managed to crawl to the safety of the narrow cleft by which she had reached the small plateau, thus effecting escape.

Bok stood glaring at the cleft, his eyes spilling savage lights of hatred. When the nanny touched him with her muzzle, he whirled, slapping her neck with the side of his head. He blew sharply and the nanny wheeled, gave out a voice signal and leaped to a shelf above, to be followed by her band, but old Bok remained alone on the battle site, his eyes now glaring down at the dead form of the kid.

Grunting, he moved in, hooked his horns under the limp shape, then heaving, he sent it hurtling out to that drop of hundreds of feet to the slide rock below where, with the mangled wolf carcass, it would become the public property of lesser predators.

Having "cleaned house," Bok stepped along towards a patch of sparse, sweet grass where he fed in contentment before slumping to rest, his nose into wind.

For a time his eyes blinked as his bearded head nodded and bobbed. Now and then he started at the distant wail of coyotes far below, but he was not disturbed. There was no longer a fresh danger scent to disturb him or the band.

At last he slept, though his senses were still attuned. Because of such alertness when, even in his sleep, his ears and nose would detect the slightest sign of danger, Bok had survived against the attacks by cougar, grizzly and by that most dreaded of all enemies, man...

* * *

THE FOLLOWING sunny morning, it was such a man creature who, through a powerful set of binoculars, picked up Bok, the king billy. Jim Steel, forest ranger, turned and called to his companion.

"You said you wanted a good glimpse of him, Doc," Jim called. "Here's your chance. Take a sight on the face of Old Man Butte, draw a point left an' you'll see a sight you've likely never seen before in all your specimen hunting—ol' King Bok in all his glory, sunning himself just like he knew he was out of rifle range."

Professor Dale Greening took the glasses. Once every second year he scouted the mountain country for the best wildlife specimens, timing his arrival here at the Bitterroots to fit in with Steel's vacation period. Curator of one of the best-known museums of natural history, Greening catered to visiting zoologists, anthropologists, from all over the continent. He took only the most nearly perfect specimens.

He gasped. "At last!" he exclaimed. "I'd given up all hope of ever seeing him, Steel. Superb! Bok, the bigboss of the—Bitterroots! I believe you, now, for I have never seen a more nearly perfect specimen. When can we start?"

A slow grin toyed with Jim Steel's mouth as he shook his head.

"Not for me, Doc... I never promised to get Bok for you. I promised only a sight of him. I've often said that if Bok was killed, or died, I'd quit my job here. I can't help associatin' him with all the—uh—glory an'—majesty of the high peaks country. It is Bok that has held the small goat band together here, against all kinds of predators, includin' man... No, sir, Doc. Some other billy, but not Bok. I've still got a week of my vacation left. I'll go along with you for another big billy, or for any other critter you'd like."

Steel broke off twisting a cigarette. The grin had faded from his mouth as Greening turned to face him.

"But you understand, Steel, I'm not a predatory hunter. I'm interested only in the scientific angle. I wouldn't kill a prairie chicken just for the sport of killing. From my findings, my specimens, we teach zoology—science, history. I—uh—well, I do believe you're sentimentally serious!"

"Check. Let's finish breakfast an' pack. I'd like to take you into the country where Acheeta, the queen cougar, roams. There's a specimen for you—the biggest most beautiful cougar in the Bitterroots, and the greatest killer. I wouldn't mind if you bagged her, for she's dynamite to my deer, sheep an' goats."

Shortly they were eating their breakfast of fried sidemeat, coffee, flapjacks. Greening was silent, his small goatee jerking up and down in a manner that brought a sly grin from Steel. Suddenly the professor's pale blue eyes sparkled.

"Well," he said, "if I promise not to kill your king billy, will you guide me up to where I can possibly photograph him? I'd—settle for that: a few good telephoto lens action shots, close ups, so that I'd at least have something to present, boast about."

"Okay, for sure, Doc, but I'm warnin' you we'll have a rough climb. Might take us three days or more to reach his haunts... How's your coffee?"

"Splendid. Best I ever drank... How about you joining me one day, Steel? You'd enjoy the work at the museum and in the field."

But Steel shrugged. "I like my critters as neighbors—alive, on the hoof, sir," he answered. "Mebbe so when I'm too stove up for this work."

Greening interrupted, chuckling. "And where do you imagine I'll be, when you reach that stove-up stage?" he asked...

Jim Steel was whistling as he made his diamond hitches... Greening was still trying to pick up Bok in the glasses, but the old king billy's eyes were keen. He required no glasses to show him the movement below. Instinctively he sensed an element of impending danger. He had withdrawn from his sunning rimrock and was now moving on to join his band. It was a strange, uncommon occurrence this, but Bok started to shift his band to entirely new range, on toward the north east, up slide clefts into tortuous country which caused the adult nannies to bleat nervously... Instinctively, ordinarily old Bok avoided the areas subject to dangerous slides but today, as instinctively he deliberately moved the band up into such an area.

QUIVERING, old Bok stood grandiosely on a shelf of wind-blown rock, conning the vast, rugged mountain area. His nervous band huddled timorously below. The nannies stomped restlessly as nervously they conned the broad slide chasm filled with dirty snow above them.

Now and then a rock stirred from its moorings to go tumbling, bounding down some old slide chute—booming hollowly as it gathered others of like size in a rollicking descent to the jagged catch canyon below, a thousand feet or more below.

But Bok displayed no sign of alarm, albeit his every nerve fibre was taut.

When the strong sun struck the snow-filled chasm, and the sound of dripping water struck his hearing, Bok's ears pricked sharply forward and back or rotated as he listened for the slightest sound which could cause instant alarm.

Grunting, he whipped his big body out, dropping lightly to an out-thrust square of rock scarcely twice his size. He stood poised momentarily, then again dropped lightly down the next step of his chosen "stairs," then minced along to join the band. He was sour of mood as if wholly resentful of this necessity for husbanding the band which ordinarily was the responsibility of the adult nannies.

He lowered his head and blew sharply as a venturesome kid jumped toward him. The youngling skidded back on his haunches, bleating. A nanny sidled up to Bok, grunting sharp blats of protest, but he lowered his head, glaring, giving out guttural grunts of warning.

Now he turned and led on down the jagged "staircase" toward the timberline where there was good food, grass and succulent, tender herbage...

But—also—and Bok seemed wholly aware of it for he paused every few steps to search wind—danger lurked, danger in the possible presence of roaming silvertips and cougars. But Bok and his kind feared most that man scent, and so of the great evils instinctively he elected to pit his wits against the lesser of these.

* * *

The band contentedly at the timberline, Bok roamed off alone. He entered a patch of stunted evergreen timber whose groves were soft to the touch of his hoofs—soft and spongy with sweet moss and grass. He lowered his head and began to feed.

Three days and nights passed. Bok held himself aloofly from the band. In the soft flush of early evening he moved away to drink, or to climb to some point of vantage from which he could survey a wide area of the surrounding country.

The fourth evening, he was standing thus poised at sunset when suddenly as if their time of approach had been synchronized, Bok caught the sharp tang of both cougar and man.

Momentarily he was frozen to immobility... Grumbling thunder now boomed around the mountain bowls, every now and then breaking into smashing reverberations.

The air was muggy, humid, and Bok's sides bellowsed sharply.

Then suddenly the storm broke with a violence of which only a mountain storm is capable. Savage forked lightning slashed the cliff faces, attended by frightening detonations, barrages of thunder which seemed to cleave the roiled clouds, splitting them, to bring rain in sheets.

Bok dropped lightly to solid footing below, and moved on down to rejoin the band. Danger threatened now from three quarters. Heavy warm rain on the slide track snow; man; and the lurking cougar creatures....

An old nanny trotted bleating to Bok's flank. He did not thrust at her. He cocked his head, his jaws working vigorously, his eyes alive with the reflected lights of the lightning flashes.

When the nanny murmured softly, Bok bobbed his head up and down as if in agreement with some mysterious message passed by his chief consort, but when suddenly she started moving the band to eastward, he leaped ahead to take command. He stomped his hoofs as he whirled, to gutter grunted protestation.

Gradually his prerogative of leadership was restored. He turned the band and led them up by the safest possible route on those slippery rock shelves, up toward the quivering mass of honeycombed snow....

THE STORM blew itself out, and hot sun again broke the clouds the following morning. Before noon, the sky was almost clear, save for steamy mists which swirled about the mountain faces.

Soft, delicious scents wafted up from the steaming timberline foliage, but blended with the seductive scents was that dread scent of man and sharp whiffs of cougar scent.

Now perched high, like a piece of carven alabaster, Bok's eyes flashed as they caught movement. A prevailing southeasterly breeze brought him strong scent of man.

Save for the pennanting of his beard, he was as immobile as the flat outcrop rock on which he stood, displayed in all his majesty.

Suddenly Bok turned, to face the east. His movement acted as a signal to the nannies below. Like wraiths they melted from their small plateau, out of sight of the watching man creatures...

Carefully, scarcely seeming to move, Bok backed himself in behind a knob of out-thrust rock at the cliff-side...and the watching man not far below swore bitterly.

* * *

Dale Greening had climbed steadily, painstakingly, carrying his rifle and action camera slung over his shoulders. Bok, the king billy, was almost within the range of his telephoto lens when suddenly the big billy had screened himself.

Below, following up Greening, Jim Steel grinned at the king goat's act of camouflage... But his grin faded. He sensed the closeness to that danger slide zone and he wondered just why a creature so wise as Bok had brought the band to this zone... Steel was feeling sorry for Greening who had been at the point of unstrapping his camera when Bok shifted. Certainly the professor deserved the reward of some good close-ups of the old bearded king.

Suddenly Steel's eyes flashed. He saw Greening, frustrated, pulling the rifle's sling over his head. He was about to break his promise. The billy still offered a target for the rifle, if not for the camera...

The ranger cupped a hand to his mouth and boomed a call.

"Don't—fire!" he bellowed, and he was not thinking solely of the safety of Bok, but of that quivering slide mass above, left... Jim Steel was wholly cognizant of the danger, when even a rifle shot could precipitate a devastating slide.

He saw the king goat leap out almost before the blast of Greening's shot. Steel whirled, and slid down to a rock shelf, on which he turned and made cautiously for an overhang of rock, a small cave into which he backed as he heard that slow grumbling sound which intensified as the snow and rock and mud started down.

The Ranger groaned with concern

for Greening as he backed himself flatter against the cliff wall, as boulders thumped frighteningly above him.

Thousands of tons of snow and rock rubble hurricaned down, with frightening, almost indescrible sound volume.

The entire mountain zone seemed to quiver, as if blasted by a severe earthquake and at the catch canyon below, there were deeper sounds, hollow booming thunder as the masses crashed to the bottomland...

At last Steel was able to calm himself, retrieve his nerve, as he ventured forward from under the overhang. His chief concern was for Greening. But not for some time was he able to venture out completely, to begin a search, for rocks continued to pound on down, rocks even far removed from the main slide site...

Now the ranger moved on, seeking a cleft up which he could begin his climb. He rounded a shoulder and then slightly above, on an unaccountable small plateau, he glimpsed the forms of two cougars—Acheeta, the big female, and a large young male follower. Steel unshipped his rifle and raised it, but Acheeta bounded forward to a cleft, and cover.

"On the trail of the goat band for sure," Steel told himself. "Pity the slide couldn't have gotten those big cats! Let's hope ol' Bok—got—clear..."

He started to climb and within an hour was stopped by a hail. Greening was in between two large, secure boulders.

Steel reached him and frowned, for the professor's face was badly bruised, bleeding. There was no sign of his expensive camera, or of his rifle.

STEEL tipped the neck of his canteen to Greening's pale lips and smiled as the professor's eyes opened and began to bat sharply. When recognition of Steel came, the zoologist smiled thinly.

"I—I expect I'm all—washed up—in—your estimation—Steel. I'm sorry, my friend. I should have known better, but—frustration when that king billy hid himself from the camera, made something boil up inside me. I—" He lay back, breathing hard and Jim Steel made a thorough examination, glad to discover that no serious damage was done.

"We all make mistakes, Doc," he said softly. "Rest up a bit, then we'll collect your equipment and move out. I think I can promise some interesting action, for I saw Acheeta and a big male lion not far off. They're on the trail of the goats..."

"My—my camera, rifle, Steel!" Greening was sitting up staring wildly about him.

"I lost the camera. Flying rock struck it, the same barrage that nearly knocked my head off. I have no idea what happened to the rifle... I —Steel, I'm puzzled. Why did that old king billy lead his band up here to the edge of a big danger zone? I'll have to study that. Unaccountable action, amazing, and yet we saw it—experienced it ourselves..."

Jim Steel was staring off in the direction at which he had last seen old Bok.

"When you're fit enough to travel, we'll shove off, Doc. I'm a mite anxious to follow up that cougar trail. I don't want her wiping out Bok's entire band of younglin's..."

* * *

Old Bok held to the upper levels, his watchful eyes ever trained on the movement of his band below.

A large, dirty brown patch stained his handsome white coat at the right shoulder, from a wound by flying rock. But his heavy coat had saved him from serious injury. Now and then he grunted savagely as he attempted to lick the area.

Though hungry, he sagaciously held to his position of vantage—a lone sentinel for the band... It was his custom on such sunny mornings to sit on the rimrock and enjoy the warmth, but today high on a windblown cliffside, wholly conscious of his responsibility, he stolidly kept his vigil.

When he caught occasional whiffs of man scent, his eyes flashed. He

[*Turn To Page 89*]

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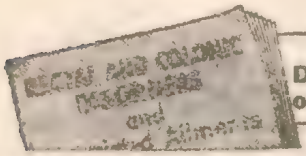

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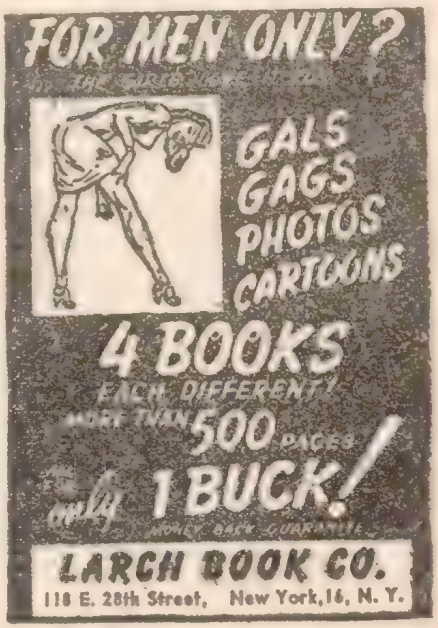

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felt a pulling at his shoulder wound, and grunted as if he associated his wounding with the presence of the man creatures... Here on the cliff-side, there was no means of hiding. He was wholly exposed, and thus the men below saw him, in all his white majesty, which caused Greening to swallow hard and make strange throat sounds.

He turned to Steel. His goatee jerked vigorously before at last speech came.

"You've done me a great service, Steel," he said huskily. "I should have known better, known enough to realize that your big boss of the Bitterroots is necessary to the survival of the small goat band. I've learnt a sharp and valuable lesson."

The ranger smiled and led on, now and then picking up both goat and cougar sign.

They faded from old Bok's view as they struck a scrub thicket...

He was still standing guard when the sun lowered and purpled rose shadows of swiftly approaching twilight danced shuddering across the rugged mountain faces.

BOK SHOOK his head and his ebony black horns gleamed in the light of the half moon. Though the man scent was still strong, he had in some measure lost his sense of dread of it. It was the sharp tang of the cougars that concerned him now. As he dropped down to the lower levels and picked up cougar sign, Bok became electrified with hatred and fear and desire for battle...

Ahead, Acheeta, the big killer, and her follower moved along with patience. The lingering close-in scent of the man creatures, held a curb on her desires as, tail weaving and jerking, she and her companion killer glided along in the trail of Bok's band.

Now and then Bok paused, but only long enough to search wind, or to snatch at bits of herbage along the way.

When a dislodged boulder roared on down a scored slope, he froze, his every nerve fibre taut with caution.

At last, as he finished the navigation of an extremely narrow ledge, which only his sure hoofs could have stepped without a slip, he paused, his nose picking up the sweet scent of fresh spring water. This scent was blended with the strong steamy tang of his band.

Shortly he guttered a call of reassurance as he heard a sudden thump of hoofs. A nanny had come stamping to scout for danger sign.

Soon old Bok was flicking her muzzle with his tongue, but not for long. He turned abruptly from her and stepped sharply toward the spring to drink.

In the moonlight, the reflection of his head and high-humped shoulders in the small pool loomed in grotesque proportions... Wisely, Bok drank only sparingly. In his great wisdom he sensed that danger lurked on every quarter, that danger was imminent: it might strike at any second.

He leaped to a position on a boulder outcropping just above the small plateau and there, throughout the night, he stood guard.

* * *

THE DAWN was nudging night aside, paling the half moon when Acheeta struck. Old Bok heard the light crash of scrub underbrush.

He gave out a grunted signal, but there was no chance of escape for the band, no opportunity to leap up to safety, for the cougar pair rushed and struck.

Bok dropped and at once hurled himself into counter attack. Acheeta sprang backward, almost spilling her big companion against whose side she crashed.

Now, his eyes flashing, his lower jaw working vigorously, Old Bok made his stand, between the cougar pair and his band.

Acheeta suddenly bunched her paws under her and leaped high, a prodigious leap of some fifteen feet, clearing Bok's back as she struck at the nearest kid.

Bok was trapped. Had he whirled, he would have been an open target

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for the male lion. But he suddenly lowered his head and charged. A horn raked the lion's flank, sending him sprawling, but no serious damage was done. At once Bok wheeled. His chief old consort nanny had succeeded in driving Acheeta off before the kid's throat was slashed. Bleating piteously, the little one staggered to the huddled main band.

It had come: the climactic battle to the death!

There was not in Bok's band a billy goat of sufficient maturity, weight or wisdom to side him in his great fight.... Bok quickly challenged all surplus billies as they matured, sending them wandering off to seek out bands of their own on far ranges.

This early morning, he could depend only on one or two of the older nannies and his own great fighting power against the fiercest odds he had ever encountered.

The two lions backed off together, their faces hideous masks of temporary frustration, of hatred. But suddenly, with no voiced signal, they sprang together. Bok's chief nanny was down. He whirled and took a savage raking from a set of cougar foretalons across the face as he charged and butted Acheeta from the old nanny's form. She was dripping blood as she recovered and scrambled to her feet.

Again Bok wheeled and struck, his off side ebony spear hooking the male cat under the left shoulder, but the lithe, tawny killer sprang clear before that horn point could gouge beyond the thickness of his hide.

In that instant Acheeta hurled herself forward, her forepaws lashing like pistons. Talons raked the big billy. He was rocked back on to his haunches, but came up as Acheeta lunged...

It was at this point, stealing cautiously through the thicket with the wind in their favor, the man creatures fetched up at the battle site.

Professor Greening instantly raised a .45 Colt's, but Steel caught at his arm.

A hideous screech came from the

lioness as she wheeled and struck at the nanny which had butted her, giving Bok a chance at recovery. The nanny leaped high, almost vertically and Acheeta skidded, as she overshot her target.

His coat now splashed a dirty brown in large patches, blinking through one good eye and one sightless eye, Bok whipped into action with a speed that amazed the watching men.

Greening placed his mouth close to the ranger's ear.

"Can't we do—something—?" he whispered.

"Want to hit the billy? Just watch, Doc. I—" Steel broke off. Both lions converged in an attack on an old nanny. Bok wheeled and struck. The nanny was down, Acheeta astride her, but she lashed up and tore with her free forepaw, sending Bok staggering back, but his hoofs held. He charged and his terrible horns jerked upward as they hooked.

Screeching, Acheeta went spinning across the small plateau, but Bok was not done. He whipped about to smash-butt the male lion in a flank...

The nanny staggered to her feet, but had no more fight in her. Alone, Bok continued to smash at the young lion, until the creature lay limp, its tail twitching jerkily, convulsively.

But Acheeta, thwarted, was recovering. Her hatred mounted as she weaved stealthily up on Bok's rear as in his mad passion he still continued to pound at the now dead lion.

Acheeta was bunched, her shoulders humped ready to spring, which could have meant swift death to the old king billy, but Jim Steel's rifle was slowly rising.

Almost in the same instant that Acheeta rose, Steel pulled and a heavy bullet ploughed through her chest, bringing her down stone dead, save for a twitching of her long beautiful body in the final throes of death...

THE KING goat stood head high. The thunder of the shot had

[*Turn Page*]

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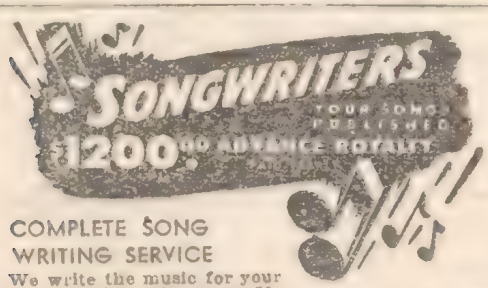

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completely shocked him, but now, a battle-scarred old warrior, he stomped forward a few stiff paces, prepared to charge the man creatures, whose scent was now sharp in his nostrils.

But Steel was tugging at Greening's arm.

"We'll come back and skin out that lioness later, Doc," Jim said. "Let's get the hell out of here before the big boss re'lly hooks us... I'd hate to have to kill him, now, in self-defense..."

Two days later, Greening still admiring the handsome trophy—Acheeta's hide, complete with head, Jim Steel suddenly hailed him. Greening hurried to the ranger's side and eagerly took over the powerful binoculars. Steel was grinning wide.

"Just follow the red ledge above the timberline till you pick him up," he said... "Both of 'em!"

Greening gasped as into the circle of his lense focus came King Bok and his chief consort nanny—a wild-life group to inspire the most exacting of specimen hunters. They stood together on a narrow rock shelf which overlooked a vast rugged zone of the Bitterroots.

"Big—boss of the—ah—Bitterroots!" Greening's lips framed the words, but no sound came as he continued to stare at the sun-splashed forms of old Bok and his chief consort.

Now Bok turned, flicked the nanny with his tongue. She sprang out and down, leaving him alone.

Greening's thin lips parted as he watched Bok settle on to his rump, his forehoofs over the edge of the rimrock in a ludicrous pose, but a pose of comfort as the great king of the uplands now oblivious to danger, sunned his battle-scarred form, and in his own wild way gloated over his recent conquest and the retention of his majesty.

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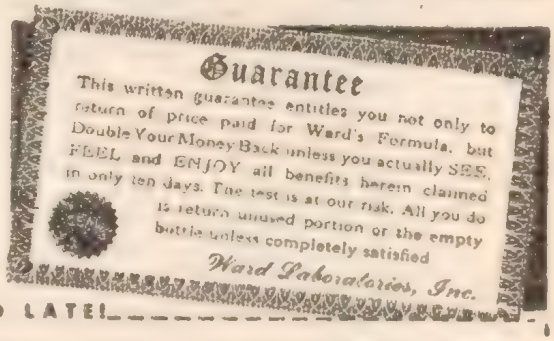
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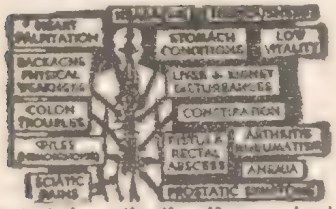

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★ Death's ★ Score Card

True Fact Feature

by The Lawdog

THE WESTERN killer, whether on the right or wrong side of the law, generally did not keep a score card of those whom he dispatched to the other world. For killing was grim business, and the main object was to stay alive—and unharmed, if possible. There were some men who put notches on their guns to keep score and hence the expression, "he had ten notches on his gun" meant he had killed ten men. That champion killer of Texas. John Wesley Hardin, was said to have had "forty notches on his gun." If you read the life of this killer, as written by himself, you discover he had many guns; it certainly would have been a nuisance to transfer score from gun to gun.

There was a time in the life of Kit Carson when he kept score of the people he killed by the simple technique of placing a brass tack on the stock of his rifle for every soul sent to the happy hunting grounds. We know that, at the age of thirty-two, he had killed nineteen men because his rifle of that date still exists; you can count the tacks. But this score is inaccurate because we know that during the time he was with Fremont, he engaged in thirteen battles. Maybe he didn't count the Spaniards and Indians he killed during that period of his life.

Bloody Bill Anderson, who served under the famous guerilla fighter, Charley Quantrill, had a simple score board to keep tab of the people he killed. In his pocket he carried a silken cord. When he finished a raiding expedition, he would sit down and check back on the people he had killed. Then he would tie a knot for each of his victims. Eventu-

ally his score card reached fifty-three knots. As a result of a raid to avenge the death of his sister, he added fourteen knots.

A rather grim way of keeping score was by displaying scalps. It was the white man, during the colonial wars, who showed his Indian ally this technique. A payment was made for each person dispatched, and the payment per scalp prevented using the same body twice. The white man took the Indian's scalp and the redman took the white man's scalp. Even Buffalo Bill took scalps. It was just after the Custer Massacre and the hostile bands of Sitting Bull were on the warpath. Colonel Cody was away from home, and Mrs. Cody didn't know whether her husband was dead or alive. The expressman brought her a small square box. The label showed that one of its shipping points had been Fort McPherson and the consignor was William Frederick Cody. She pried open the lid and a terrific odor hit her nostrils. Inside the box was the red raw scalp of an Indian.

However, there were notches on six-shooters, as in the case of Bat Materson. A gun collector was bothering Bat for the six-shooter he had used against the bad men in his frontier days. Unable to get rid of the pest and not wanting to give him his favorite gun, Bat hit on a simple plan. He went to a pawnshop and bought an old Colt .45. As it lay on his desk, he got a brainstorm; he carved twenty-two notches on the butt. This gun was given to the collector who felt he had made a wonderful "find." From then on the story spread and Bat Materson was a "killer with twenty-two notches on his gun." That was a score card to end all score cards.

(Note: It is extremely doubtful if many, or any, of the real gunfighters of the Old West notched their guns, at least so long as they would be using a particular one. Notching would throw off the balance of the weapon, and an expert would have better sense than so to tamper with his tool. Editor.)

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CAVALIER of the BIRD CAGE

Fact Feature

by W. Edmunds Claussen

EVEN TOMBSTONE'S hardened miners felt a strange sympathy for Russian Bill. They hoped he might never stretch his neck on a taut rope. But that was exactly his fate.

He rode with Curly Bill's outlaws simply because Curly felt the mysterious bond that drew them together. Although the one was foreign born, and alien to the wild mining camps, the same reckless, dangerous blood washed the veins of both. They were lush swashbuckling freebooters of hell who wrote their records side by side in the tally book of the old West. Curly was the real thing. Russian was the imitation. Yet in the end he stood the acid test and passed it like a man.

He had flowing golden hair, eyes that danced brightly, a pair of spanking new Colt .45s. And he admitted to a black record that was as hard to back-track as his proper

name. Everybody snickered behind his back at the black record. Nightly he swaggered into the *Bird Cage Theater* in his extravagant clothes.

Billy Hutchinson met him with a pat on the shoulder. "Found a real road show tonight. Best girls I ever saw!"

Russian Bill answered with the flourish that was his; the diction that failed to stack against his hard brag of a past. "You've got some nice girls, Billy?"

Hutchinson grinned around a cigar. "Always *nice* girls in the *Bird Cage.*"

There was a decorum about Tombstone's theater that was not present in any other hall where a man might kick his heels. Its ladies were admittedly a notch above the women of the cribs. Of all its patrons who watched the fluffy blondes in their skinfitting tights, Russian Bill was most mis-cast.

The boxes rented in accordance with their proximity to the footlights. They were curtained and for a sum the curtains could be drawn affording a measure of privacy. Between acts the show girls carried straw baskets among the boxes. These were partitioned for the various brands of liquor. No refreshment was sold in containers of less than a quart.

To the left of the house in a box nearest the footlights sat Russian Bill.

He rented this same box every night for two years—at a price of 25 dollars per night. To the ladies sharing his pleasure he could recite Shelly or Keats with equal feeling.

When he first approached Curly Bill with his proposition of joining the smugglers Curly shot a cigar from between Bill's teeth. Russian Bill's courage was tested at that point; it was not lacking. All of Galeyville was amazed when he didn't run. He stayed around and got the job.

In that act was cemented a friendship as strange as any in the old West. Russian Bill rode at Curly's stirrups wherever the desperado went. Perhaps it was mutual admiration for the other, perhaps it was Curly's love of a good joke; or it may have been a protectoral impulse that strangely prompted the outlaw to accept his under study.

IN TIME Russian Bill began to feel his conscience; it plagued him. He was not really bad and he knew it. Innocent new arrivals cringed from his sight merely because he carried the reputation of a Curly Bill rider. Actually, he had never done an unkind act in his life. He might swagger beneath two guns, but he was still the man who could recite verse.

It rankled him until he was no longer able to put up with his own make-believe.

His first and last act of lawlessness was to lift a horse that bore another man's brand. For this crime he was picked up in Shakespeare, a mining camp in the Pyramids. He might still have escaped the noose, for his golden locks made an impression on his jury.

"'Most a sin to hang a man as purty as him," one tough-scaled silver miner acknowledged.

But his case was heard jointly with Sandy King, another of the Curly Bill outlaws who had shot Shakespeare up twice that same day. It was too much. Sandy King must die, and the horsethief with him.

They lifted Russian Bill's fancy stitched boots above the planks and he died in the glory of being a man.

They strung the pair by their necks to the rafters of the old *Pioneer House.* It was evening, and against the proprietor's wishes they left them hanging for the morning stage. A good warning that Shakespeare wanted law.

Months later Mayor Thomas, of Tombstone, received a letter from a lady of the court of the Czar. She was worried about her son's long silence and requested information. She got it. From Tombstone they forwarded a kindly answer.

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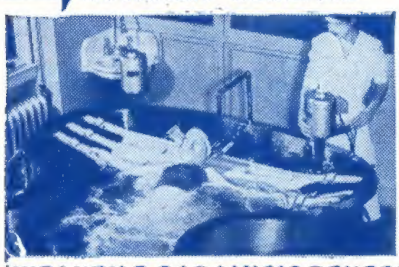

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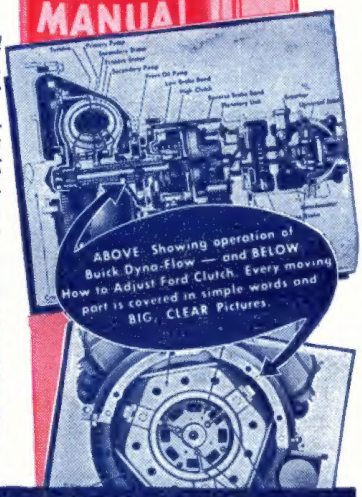
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